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# Homosexuality

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A Study for United Methodist Groups  
Using the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality

THE CHURCH STUDIES HOMOSEXUALITY  
Study Book  
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# Social Principles Statements Relating to Homosexuality

These are the official statements of The United Methodist Church on human sexuality—including homosexuality—as adopted by the General Conference as part of the Social Principles as printed in *The Book of Discipline*, 1992:

*F) Human Sexuality.*—We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the Church, and society. We call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the Church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitative within as well as outside marriage. We reject all sexual expressions which damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity, in the midst of diverse opinion as to what constitutes that enhancement.

We deplore all forms of the commercialization and exploitation of sex with their consequent cheapening and degradation of human personality. We call for strict enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation or use of children by adults. We call for the establishment of adequate protective services, guidance, and counseling opportunities for children thus abused. We insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.

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We recognize the continuing need for full, positive, and factual sex education opportunities for children, youth, and adults. The Church offers a unique opportunity to give quality guidance/education in this area.

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

G) *Rights of Homosexual Persons.*—Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have: shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships which involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*—1992, Paragraphs 71F and 71G; pages 91–92. Copyright © 1992 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

# Introduction

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In this study we will deal with subject matter that many of us find difficult to handle in open and serious conversations even with our own families. We may find these matters even more difficult to discuss with other members of our United Methodist family. Few of us had parents who talked openly and freely with us about sexual behavior; few of us heard serious talk about sexuality in any church-connected context. Most of us lack good examples of how to talk about sex-related matters in an open, respectful, seeking way. Yet our self-perpetuating silence only compounds everyone's problems related to sexuality.

Homosexuality is an issue before the church. It is an issue that will not go away. In recent memory the church has been almost totally silent on the subject. Only rarely can we find a congregation that has conducted discussions including various points of view on homosexuality, or has invited persons who are themselves homosexual to talk about their experiences.

Of course, in the church as in the rest of the world, sex is discussed, but nearly always in the context of jokes or with words that denigrate women or homosexual persons. Perhaps jokes about sex abound because our interest in the subject is so great and our need to talk about it so strong. We take refuge in the understanding that joking protects us from being taken seriously while it allows us to think out loud about the forbidden subject.

However, this joking is not entirely harmless. Casual jokes about homosexuality have often hurt young people who are unsure about their sexual identity, as well as adults who identify themselves as homosexual but do not make that identity public, and their families.

A straightforward, serious study about homosexuality will allow us to express the interest and concern we feel about the subject, but to do so in an atmosphere of love and respect for all God's children.

The following rules, if agreed on by everyone in this study group, will create a space in which we can speak safely about this difficult subject.

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## Discussion Rules

1. We will speak with respect
  - *to* each other,
  - *of* each other, and
  - *about* people outside our study group.
2. We will do our best to understand and express our own feelings on the subject of homosexuality.
3. When we speak, we will resist the natural desire to convince others that we are right. Instead we will simply say what we ourselves have experienced, have read, or believe—and leave it at that.
4. We will be brief.
5. We will listen carefully to what others say.
6. We will keep confidential anything that a group member has said that might embarrass him or her if it were repeated outside the context of the study group.

## The Committee to Study Homosexuality

When we begin our study, we travel in the footsteps of the Committee to Study Homosexuality. This committee was established by legislation passed by the 1988 General Conference of The United Methodist Church with the mandate to conduct its study and to report to the 1992 General Conference. The committee's members were appointed by the General Council on Ministries.

While several individual annual conferences within The United Methodist Church have conducted their own studies, they could not command the resources, tap the wisdom of major experts in the relevant fields of knowledge, or bring the church-wide perspective to their studies that was available for the work of the general church's committee.

The committee held eight meetings of three or four days each between the 1988 and 1992 General Conferences. Each member read many books, specially prepared papers, and other materials relating to homosexuality. Most members themselves also prepared papers, which were then read by the committee and entered into the discussion.

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Recognized scholars in the fields of biblical interpretation, theology, psychology, medicine, and sociology wrote special reports for the committee; many of them testified in person.

The committee held "listening posts" in each regional jurisdiction. At these listening posts they listened to gay and lesbian Christians, family members of gay or lesbian persons, gays and lesbians who are comfortable with their situation and are seeking acceptance in the church. They heard from gay and lesbian persons who testified that they wanted to change. They heard from representatives of unofficial groups such as Good News, Reconciling Congregations, Transforming Congregations, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Affirmation. They also heard from laypersons, diaconal ministers, pastors, district superintendents, and chairpersons of boards of ordained ministry representing no one but themselves.

The Reverend Nancy Yamasaki, chairperson of the committee, testified that her work on the committee was life-changing for her. She believed it had been so for many other members of the committee as well.

This curriculum makes extensive use of the work done by the general church committee. It was clear from their reports that the committee members felt blessed by their experience and hoped that all United Methodists could engage in such a time of listening, studying, and learning.

In preparing this curriculum our aim has been to include in these lessons as much of that kind of experience as is humanly possible, in the hope that you will be similarly blessed.

—Dorothy L. Williams

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Report on the Study of Homosexuality is printed on the following pages as reported by the Committee to the General Council on Ministries and to the 1992 General Conference. The Implementing Recommendations are printed on pages 39–40 as amended by the General Conference. The entire Report was "received," not "approved," by the General Conference. As such, the Report does *not* represent the official position of The United Methodist Church. Only the Social Principles statements printed on pages 2–3 represent the official position.



# Report on the Study of Homosexuality

Petition Number: FM-10865-3000-A; GCOM.

## Introduction

Beginning virtually with its own creation as a new denomination following merger in 1968, The United Methodist Church has repeatedly addressed and struggled with issues of homosexuality and the church. Since 1972, statements about homosexuality have been placed in the Church's Social Principles by each General Conference. Provisions have also been added to other parts of *The Book of Discipline* relating to matters of ordination and appointment of clergy.

The 1988 General Conference determined that the church should explore this significant matter in a comprehensive way. It directed the General Council on Ministries to conduct a study on behalf of the whole church. The following is the complete text of Calendar Item 348 adopted by the 1988 General Conference creating the study process on homosexuality:

*"Whereas, human sexuality is affirmed by The United Methodist Church as a good gift from the God of love, but a gift that can contribute both to fulfillment and to brokenness among imperfect people; and*

*Whereas, the interpretation of homosexuality has proved to be particularly troubling to conscientious Christians of differing opinion; and*

*Whereas, important biblical, theological, and scientific questions related to homosexuality remain in dispute among persons of good will; and*

*Whereas, the church possesses the resources of mind and spirit to resolve such issues reasonably and in faithfulness to the gospel it proclaims;*

*Therefore, be it resolved that the General Council on Ministries be directed to conduct a study and report to the 1992 General Conference, using consultants as it deems appropriate, including persons representative of the major existing points of view on homosexuality within the church and persons well-versed in scientific and theological method. The council shall:*

*a) Study homosexuality as a subject for theological and ethical analysis, noting where there is consensus among biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists and where there is not.*

*b) Seek the best biological, psychological, and sociological information and opinion on the nature of homosexuality, noting points at which there is a consensus among informed scientists and where there is not.*

*c) Explore the implications of its study for the Social Principles.*

*Be it further resolved that this action become effective immediately upon the adjournment of the 1988 General Conference."*

To fulfill this directive, at its first meeting of the quadrennium the General Council on Ministries established a special Committee to Study Homosexuality. What follows in this Report No. 16 of the General Council on Ministries to the 1992 General Conference is the full report of GCOM's Committee to Study Homosexuality. *(It should be noted for information that the report does not address issues of clergy ordination or appointment since that matter was not part of the General Conference mandate.)*

At its meeting on December 4, 1991, the General Council on Ministries voted to receive the committee's report. Several changes to the last section entitled "Implementing Recommendations for the Committee's Report" were offered by Council members during its consideration. Except for one minor change in wording, none of the other proposed changes was approved, although they were thoughtfully and thoroughly debated. In fulfillment of the mandate from the 1988 General Conference and the GCOM action in receiving the report, the General Council on Ministries now refers the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, including the committee's recommendations for implementation of the report, to the 1992 General Conference for its serious and prayerful consideration.

# **Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality**

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## Introduction

Called by the church to devote serious study to an issue perplexing United Methodists, we have above all else sought to be faithful to the gospel of our Lord. We have centered our work through these years in worship together. We have drawn strength from Scripture, from the great hymns and liturgies of our faith, and from shared witness to the work of Christ among us. We have devoted many days to serious study, consultations with acknowledged experts, hearings with those most deeply and personally affected, and conversations and correspondence with fellow United Methodists. We have sought to be both honest and healing. As we report now to the church, we pray that our work will contribute to truth and to the upbuilding of the Body of Christ in faithfulness and love.

### I. The Church's Struggle and the Committee's Mandate

The United Methodist Church has struggled with issues related to homosexuality for twenty years. In the words of the 1988 General Conference, "the interpretation of homosexuality has proved to be particularly troubling to conscientious Christians of differing opinion."<sup>1</sup>

#### *Beginnings of the Struggle*

Through most of our denomination's history discussion about sexual behavior was usually held in private. Homosexuality, in particular, was rarely discussed publicly. The direct, public debate began at the 1972 General Conference of the newly merged United Methodist Church. Before that time, homosexuality was not addressed in either the Social Creed of The Methodist Church or the Social Issues and Moral Standards of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. This may reflect, in part, the low visibility and general stigmatizing of homosexuality, even though enclaves of homosexual persons had formed in a number of cities by the turn of the century and educational efforts in their behalf had begun in the 1920s. A more articulate gay and lesbian rights movement began to impact major denominations in the 1960s and 1970s.

#### *General Conference Debates of the 1970s and 1980s*

Overt discussion in the United Methodist General Conference commenced when the following statement was proposed for inclusion in the new declaration of Social Principles at the 1972

General Conference. This proposal came from a four-year denominational study on United Methodist social principles, chaired by Bishop James S. Thomas.

*"Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured."*<sup>2</sup>

In the floor debate, the following phrase was added to the above statement following the word "ensured": "although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."<sup>3</sup> This paragraph was the beginning of a long and painful struggle on this issue that continues down to the present time. National caucuses have advocated strong and conflicting positions and local churches, annual conferences, and general boards and agencies of the church have been swept into the debate.

At the 1976 General Conference, motions to rescind the official condemnation of homosexual practice were made; they failed and the denomination maintained its 1972 position. In addition, three other reports were adopted, focusing on church funding. The first ordered "that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any 'gay' caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality."<sup>4</sup> The second mandated the use of resources and funds by boards and agencies "only in support of those programs consistent with the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church."<sup>5</sup> The third prohibited "funds for projects favoring homosexual practices."<sup>6</sup>

By the 1980 General Conference, much of the debate had centered on questions of ordination. An effort was made to add the phrase "no self-avowed practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in The United Methodist Church" to Paragraph 404 of the *Discipline*, but this failed. The General Conference noted, instead, that "The United Methodist Church has moved away from prohibitions of specific acts, for such prohibitions can be endless. We affirm our trust in the covenant community and the process by which we ordain ministers."<sup>7</sup> A variety of other proposals on homosexuality also failed, leaving the 1972 and 1976 position intact.

The General Conference of 1984 made no changes in the Social Principles. Issues surrounding requirements for ordination again took center stage partly due to a 1983 Judicial Council ruling that

*The Book of Discipline* did not prohibit the ordination or appointment of practicing homosexuals. After long and complicated debate, the 1984 General Conference adopted, as a standard for ordained clergy, commitment to "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness"<sup>8</sup> and the following language on homosexuality: "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."<sup>9</sup>

The issues around homosexuality, which the General Conference had debated since 1972, were again confronted in the 1988 General Conference. The Conference voted to continue the ban on ordination, the prohibition of church funding to "promote the acceptance of homosexuality," and the statement in the Social Principles. One change was made in the Social Principles statement, however, to introduce the importance of God's grace. The statement now reads:

*"Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."*<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that no General Conference has ever acted to withhold membership in the church from homosexual persons.

### *Formation of the Committee to Study Homosexuality*

The 1988 General Conference voiced a new recognition of the differing opinions on the question and of the basic good faith of United Methodists on all sides of the controversy. In a resolution establishing a study process for the 1988-92 quadrennium, the General Conference noted that "the interpretation of homosexuality has proved to be particularly troubling to conscientious Christians of differing opinion" and that "important biblical, theological, and scientific questions related to homosexuality remain in dispute among persons of good will." In directing the General Council on Ministries to conduct a study, the Conference expressed confidence that "the church possesses the resources of mind and spirit to resolve such issues reasonably and in faithfulness to the gospel it proclaims."<sup>11</sup>

The mandate called for the General Council on Ministries to conduct a study that would:

"a) Study homosexuality as a subject for theological and ethical analysis, noting where there is consensus among biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists and where there is not.

b) Seek the best biological, psychological, and sociological information and opinion on the nature of homosexuality, noting points at which there is a consensus among informed scientists and where there is not.

c) Explore the implications of its study for the Social Principles."<sup>12</sup>

Following the General Conference, the General Council on Ministries organized the Committee to Study Homosexuality to conduct this study and present a report to the GCOM prior to the 1992 General Conference. As specified in the mandate, the Committee included persons with various forms of theological, ethical, biblical, and scientific expertise. As with all United Methodist committees, categories for membership were established to assure inclusiveness of gender, racial/ethnic groups, clergy and laity, and geography. The Committee's twenty-seven members included eight GCOM members. While most members of the committee were from the United States, the GCOM was intentional in providing for a member from a Central Conference (the Philippines), seeking to affirm the global nature of United Methodism. The Committee was chaired by the Rev. Nancy S. Yamasaki, and GCOM General Secretary C. David Lundquist served as a member and provided staff support services.

Over the quadrennium, the Committee held eight plenary meetings, of three or four days each. Regional hearings, to which all United Methodists were invited, were held before smaller panels of Committee members in each of the Jurisdictions. In addition to its own survey of the literature on homosexuality, the Committee benefited from extensive interaction with several distinguished biblical, theological, ethical, sociological, psychological, and physiological authorities, as well as from discussions with representatives of action organizations and church leaders. Individually and collectively, the Committee benefited from many written communications from large numbers of United Methodists.

The extensive materials generated by this activity and technical descriptions of the Committee's work are on file with the General Council on Ministries.

## **II. The Human Reality of Homosexuality**

Above all else, the Committee has sought to remember that homosexuality is a human condition. The moral counsel of the church is always a word addressed to human beings struggling to find fullness of life as God intends. In exploring the human reality, the Committee met with many persons who identified themselves as gay, lesbian, ex-gay, ex-lesbian, parent and other

relative, friend, church official, pastor, church member. In all, several hundred persons came before the Committee and its regional panels to share their experiences and convictions concerning the subject of homosexuality.

The following are a few typical experiences:

- An ex-gay man testifies that God helped him to turn away from his homosexual lifestyle. Even though he still struggles with homosexual feelings, he has found great happiness and satisfaction in his marriage.
- The mother of a gay man dying of AIDS doesn't know how to tell her church about her son and wonders if anyone will come to his funeral.
- A gay couple tells of the joy they have found in their relationship and of the love and commitment they have for each other.
- A church member tells of his distress when a lesbian couple married each other, and he saw the lives of their husbands and children destroyed.
- A sixty-year-old lesbian and a lifelong United Methodist talks about life with her partner of twenty-nine years.
- An elderly, lifetime member of a small United Methodist church fears that having a gay minister would "kill" her church.
- A lesbian tells of her eighteen-year struggle to come to know herself and of the church's lack of support: "Imagine my confusion when I would go to church on Sunday and be told that I was a sinner, then go to my therapist who encouraged me to accept and love myself."
- A lesbian mother describes the reaction of her young son when she told him of her orientation and lifestyle: "It's all right, Mom. We've got the whole church to back us up."
- A gay couple tells of their surprise when they were instantly welcomed into a church and felt the spirit of a loving God as they took their first communion.
- The father of a gay man describes the hostility his son received at an Easter sunrise service, where such comments as, "Is this a fag church?" were made. "It breaks my heart that my son is not able to attend church," he says.
- A United Methodist minister tells of his colleague, who after his homosexuality was publicly known was strongly affirmed by his Pastor-Parish Relations Committee who wanted him reappointed. His ministry was also affirmed by the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Annual Conference.
- A young woman describes her personal journey from sexual abuse as a child, homosexual lifestyle as a young adult, to a change away from what she now considers to have been a sinful lifestyle through the help of a Christian counseling center.



- A gay man describes his experience of years of self-hatred, during which he prayed for God to heal him of homosexuality. He speaks of a transforming religious experience in which he felt himself filled with the love of God and came to recognize that "God accepts me just as I am." Now he is active in his church and lives in a committed union with a man.

For some gay and lesbian United Methodist ministers, coming out of the "closet" has meant surrendering their ministerial credentials or running the risk of never being ordained. A gay United Methodist minister stated: "I am called of God, I have all the gifts and graces for ministry, and I will happily stand on my record as to my work with local churches. . . . But, because I was honest enough to admit I am gay, I have been rejected, denied appointment." A probationary minister said she would soon forfeit her credentials and stated, "I do not believe God called me to the ministry and then asked me to deny who I am."

Church officials report a variety of experiences. One District Superintendent told of a United Methodist minister who had destroyed his ministry by making his homosexuality public. Another superintendent noted that "homosexuals I have known in church have run the gamut. Some have created resentment while others have won acclaim. In this respect, I doubt their sexuality predetermines their acceptance or nonacceptance." Still another superintendent reported that it makes a difference when a congregation learns of its pastor's homosexuality if this is a pastor they love. Then "the stereotype fades away."

### *Committee Response*

We who listened filtered this anecdotal material through our own perspectives, recognizing that personal testimony cannot settle by itself the kinds of issues the Committee was asked to address. However, each of us came away from these sessions humbled by the nature of our task, reminded afresh that the church's position on this matter affects the daily lives of men, women, and children. We were impressed by the honesty of these persons, and their testimony is an indispensable background for consideration of homosexuality as a biblical/theological and scientific question.

### **III. Theological Affirmations and Moral Quandaries**

The church is called to be a transforming presence to society, not unthinkingly conforming itself to the world's values, but committing itself to search out and do "what is good and acceptable and perfect" in the sight of God (Romans 12:1-2). For the

church, therefore, every moral question is at the same time a theological question. With this understanding and in response to our mandate, we have kept the appropriate theological and ethical considerations constantly before us, seeking in the process to discover "where there is consensus among biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists and where there is not." <sup>13</sup>

### *The Importance of Biblical Grounding*

In accordance with the statement about "Our Theological Task" in *The Book of Discipline*, we affirm that "Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine," that "through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace," and that the biblical writers are to be viewed as persons "illuminated by the Holy Spirit." We also affirm the importance of reading Scripture with open minds and hearts, that the interpretation of Scripture takes place properly "within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community," and that individual passages are to be read in light of their "original context and intention" as well as "in light of their place in the Bible as a whole." <sup>14</sup>

In our attempt to lay the appropriate scriptural foundations for our work as a committee, we have studied relevant passages, examined pertinent scholarly literature, and consulted with various biblical scholars. On a number of points there is general scholarly consensus, but on other points equally qualified scholars disagree.

Scholars are agreed that biblical writers refer only to sexual practices, never to sexual orientation, since the concept of "sexual orientation" did not originate until late in the nineteenth century. They are also agreed that specifically homosexual practice is infrequently mentioned in the Bible and that it is never the topic of major discussion. Two Old Testament stories tell of attempted (male) homosexual gang rape (Genesis 19:1-25 where the men of Sodom threaten Lot's angelic visitors and Judges 19 where the men of Gibeah want to rape a visiting male Ephraimite). In Leviticus there are two different formulations of a law, both of which specifically prohibit male homosexual intercourse. The second of these commands that those who violate this law should be put to death (18:22; 20:13). Two different New Testament lists of immoral persons include males who engage in homosexual acts (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). And there is a New Testament passage in which homosexual intercourse (both male and female) is described as one consequence of humankind's turning away from God (Romans 1:26-27).

Scholars agree that in these seven passages homosexual prac-

tice is either identified as wrong or is presumed to be so. There is also agreement that each passage must be considered carefully within its own literary, theological, and cultural context. However, like many biblical admonitions, these passages are very brief, and complex questions must be answered in order to understand them. Even the translation of words alluding to homosexual behavior is far from simple. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, for example, Paul himself uses two different words to refer to males who engage in homosexual practices. The first of these probably refers to a male who plays a passive role in a same-sex relationship, while the second refers to a male who assumes an active role. But scholars disagree about the exact type of relationship that Paul has in mind. Some believe that the first term should be translated as "male prostitute" (as in the Revised Standard Version), while others argue that Paul is using the term more generally, to apply to any male who assumes a passive role. In the first case Paul would be thinking only of male homosexual prostitution, while in the second instance he would be thinking of male homosexual practice in general. It is also not surprising that equally learned and committed scholars disagree on the larger theological and ethical significance of the biblical passages. For example, some believe that what is stated or presumed in the passages about homosexual practice is grounded theologically in the creation accounts of Genesis and supported by references in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6. From this they conclude that any kind of homosexual practice or relationship is fundamentally incompatible with biblical teaching that heterosexual union is the norm given by God at creation.

Others emphasize the diversity of the passages in question and argue that cultural factors, as well as religious, have influenced what is stated or presumed in them about homosexual practice. It is argued, for example, that Paul's description of homosexual practice as "unnatural" (Romans 1:26-27) echoes a complaint commonly voiced in the Greco-Roman world: that in male homosexual intercourse the passive partner "unnaturally" lowers himself to what was generally regarded as the inferior status of a woman, while females who engage in homoerotic activity "unnaturally" overstep the subordinate role, which ancient culture regarded as properly the woman's. Such scholars conclude, therefore, that Paul's comments on this subject in Romans 1:26-27 have no compelling theological basis or lasting ethical significance. Most members of the Committee perceived the arguments for this position to be especially strong.

Those who orient their interpretation to the creation accounts appeal specifically to Genesis 1:26-28 (God created human beings "male and female," granting them to "be fruitful and

multiply") and Genesis 2:18-28 (God created woman as man's companion and for sexual union). They would interpret Genesis 2:24 as God's instituting marriage between two monogamous heterosexuals and the complete union of two persons as referenced in Mark 10:6-9. They argue that, according to these accounts, anything other than monogamous heterosexual union is a perversion of what was established at creation, and therefore contrary to the will of God. In their view, this is why biblical references or allusions to homosexual behavior are negative.

Those who emphasize the diversity of the biblical references and allusions also read the creation accounts differently. In their view, these were not formulated as moral directives or regulations, designed to indicate what people *should* do. Rather, they believe, the creation accounts intend only to explain *why* things are as they are, and *why* human beings act as they do. Thus, Genesis 1:26-28 explains that the human species (like the animal world generally) is differentiated into male and female for the purpose of procreation. And Genesis 2:18-24 explains why, typically, people are so attracted to the opposite sex. According to this interpretation, therefore, the creation accounts simply do not address the morality of *homosexual* unions, any more than they address the moral obligations of heterosexual partners, or even the question of marriage. It is argued that the Hebrew word in Genesis 2:24 (*issha*) does not mean "wife" specifically, but "adult woman," so the verse makes no statement about marriage, let alone about monogamy.

In summary: Scholars have come to different conclusions about the theological and ethical significance for the church today of the several biblical references and allusions to homosexual practice. There are responsible contemporary biblical scholars who maintain that Scripture's negative view of homosexual practice has a firm theological grounding in the creation accounts of Genesis and therefore belongs to the enduring core of Scripture's witness. The preponderance of recent biblical scholarship maintains that the biblical view is so closely tied to the presuppositions and cultural and religious values of the ancient world that it does not belong to that enduring core. There is general agreement, however, that each of the biblical passages presents its own distinctive set of complex questions.

### *The Theological Context*

The United Methodist statement on theological method speaks of the interrelationships among Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. All four are important as United Methodists seek to understand the meaning of the gospel. "Since all truth is from

God," the statement concludes, "efforts to discern the connections between revelation and reason, faith and science, grace and nature, are useful endeavors in developing credible and communicable doctrine." <sup>15</sup>

In keeping with United Methodist teaching, the Committee has sought to give attention to each of the four sources for theological reflection. The study of biblical passages, as well as attention to methods of biblical interpretation and approaches to the Bible's authority, have been at the forefront of our study. The insights and challenges presented by human experience have entered into our study through the informal mode of Christian witnessing to faith experiences, family narratives, individual and congregational testimony, and through the social, psychological, and biological sciences. Christian tradition conveys to us the wealth of positive and negative Christian experience over the centuries—affirming the centrality of love and the positive nature of the gift of creation, though sometimes denigrating sexual expression or approving sexual activity only for purposes of procreation. Most Christian tradition has rejected same-sex erotic relationships, sometimes to the point of brutal repression. The use of reason has been valued in our work, through standards of critical study integral to the scientific disciplines as well as to the disciplines of biblical study, theological reflection, and ethical analysis.

Theological consultants drew our attention to diverse streams of tradition present within The United Methodist Church. Each of them emphasized that different viewpoints on human sexuality exist among Christians because of differences in how the sources and criteria for theological and ethical reflection are understood and interpreted. Thus, while United Methodists hold in common to the primacy of Scripture and the relevance of Reason, Tradition, and Experience as sources and criteria for theological work, significant latitude remains. This has led, in turn, to different conclusions regarding homosexuality.

### *Discerning the Core of the Faith*

Everything the Bible says about particular issues and problems must be understood and tested in light of the fundamental witness of Scripture to the meaning of God, God's self-disclosure in Christ, and our life in Christ. In evidence and testimony before the Committee, "conservatives" and "liberals" alike readily acknowledged that some scriptural passages are not applicable today. For instance, the scriptural commandments to stone idolaters or rebellious children to death (Deuteronomy 13:6-10; 21:18-21) and the directives that women should not speak in

church or teach or have authority over men (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12) are not to be taken as timeless truths. The same could be said of scriptural absolutism about divorce (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Such commandments must be seen in light of Scripture's overall witness to the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

What is this core of our faith? Understandably, Christians express this in different ways, and the Committee cannot summarize the richness and diversity of the faith witness of millions of United Methodists. But, in harmony with the doctrinal statements in our *Book of Discipline*, we are persuaded that scriptural affirmations about God's grace come close to the heart of the matter. We acknowledge the reality of human sinfulness and our brokenness before God. But we trust that through the unmerited love of God revealed in Jesus Christ we are drawn into a saving relationship with God and one another. We recognize that God's love is manifested in the work of creation and redemptive re-creation. We affirm that human relationships and the life of the spirit develop in response to God's grace in this physical world. We understand that God's purposes call us to faithful discipleship and disciplined living.

### *Further Questions*

Very important questions remain: How are we to know when the ordering of human sexuality is one of the faithful expressions of the work of God's grace in human life and when it runs counter to God's loving purposes? Can homosexuality be an expression of a life in grace, or is it necessarily an expression of sin or sickness that impedes the work of grace? How can we know which of these conclusions, or some other, is true? Four general views may be identified.

(1) Some Christians believe that the fact that the seven references or allusions to homosexual practices in the Bible are negative, together with positive biblical affirmations of heterosexual marriage, is enough to establish that homosexuality is necessarily opposed to life in grace. Those passages are understood to reveal the divinely created moral order on this subject.

(2) Some Christians are concerned to distinguish, as the biblical writers could not, between homosexual orientation and practice. They are likely to believe that homosexual practice, over which people have some control, is invariably opposed to grace, but that homosexual orientation, which is more or less "given" to some persons, may not be.

(3) Some Christians believe that the biblical references and allusions must be taken seriously but not regarded as definitive for all time. They are open to the possibility that homosexual practice is not necessarily contrary to life in grace. In their view, this would be the case if scientific data and the experience of the church with practicing homosexuals were to establish that this behavior pattern does not entail unusual spiritual and psychological problems.

(4) Some Christians conclude that the biblical references and allusions to homosexual practice were so profoundly shaped by the cultural conditions and limited insights of the ancient world that they are insufficient guides for knowing what life in grace would mean today. They believe that the church must look to Scripture for fundamental theological and ethical norms but not for all the specifics of how those are to be applied. Thus, some Christians do not believe that contemporary experience and scientific inquiry are needed to arrive at a judgment about homosexual practice. Other Christians believe that experience and scientific inquiry may be needed in order to assist in the reasonable application of the fundamental theological norms.

Among those for whom these extrabiblical sources of knowledge have a contribution to make, issues like the following need to be addressed to clarify the uses of science and ordinary human experience.

(1) If it is possible to determine that homosexual orientation is caused exclusively by physical factors, such as the genetic makeup, then this might suggest that homosexuality is neither a sin nor a sickness. And it could suggest that efforts to change this orientation are more likely to be against nature—against the way, in the providence of God, some people have been created. On the other hand, if such physiological factors cannot be found, then the sources of homosexuality must be sought in social and psychological experience and human choice.

(2) If it could be shown that homosexuality is generally a symptom of unmet emotional needs or difficulties in social adjustment, then this might point to problems in relating to God and other persons. But if that cannot generally be shown, homosexuality may be compatible with life in grace.

(3) If it could be shown that homosexual persons are not more likely than heterosexual persons to have emotional problems, to be self-centered, to be promiscuous, to be exploitative of sexual partners and others, to be less creative contributors to the good of the community, then this may help reassure us that such flaws are not caused by homosexuality. If homosex-

ual persons are found more likely than heterosexual persons to manifest such problems, then a deeper search for the connecting links may be called for.

(4) Does the church, in its ordinary human experience of known homosexuals within its fellowship, find their profession of faith and their Christian practice to be mature and growing? Do they exhibit the fruit of the Spirit to the same extent as heterosexual Christians? If so, that may be important evidence of the compatibility of some forms of homosexuality with life in grace. If not, the contrary may be true.

### *Views on Homosexuality in Contemporary Christian Ethics*

After study of the literature on homosexuality in contemporary Christian ethics and consultation with acknowledged scholars in the field, it became evident to us that there are substantial differences of method and viewpoint. Some scholars consider the practice of homosexuality in the context of committed and caring relationships to be consistent with Christian morality. Some consider this form of behavior to be morally wrong or psychologically flawed. While a few ethicists regard homosexual practice as a gravely serious problem, our studies of the literature clearly show that they are an exception in the field of Christian ethics. Most of the Christian ethicists who treat homosexual practice as sinful or abnormal do not regard this as a major problem compared, say, to war and peace, family violence, poverty, and other urgent concerns of the church. Thus, while there is a lack of consensus at the present time on fundamental issues related to homosexual practice, there is a much greater consensus among Christian ethicists that homosexual practice, as such, is not as weighty a matter as the controversy often seems to suggest.

### *The Broader Context of Christian Sexual Ethics*

In addressing this question for itself, the Committee finds that it cannot divorce a specific ethic of homosexuality from broader questions of human sexual expression. We, like others in our church, find ourselves called to the development of a sexual ethic that represents a Christian alternative to the permissiveness and repressiveness of our culture.

Sometimes the church is criticized for laying unnecessary burdens of guilt upon people, thereby inhibiting their fulfillment as sexual beings. Doubtless there are Christians who equate sex with sin and who consider the pleasures associated with sex to be morally questionable. But that extreme attitude toward sex



has long been rejected by most theologians and ethicists and by the official statements of major denominations like our own. The Social Principles, for instance, "recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons" (and that) "persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the Church, and society." <sup>16</sup> Thus, the church does not equate sex with sin.

On the other hand, Christian teaching about human sexuality has recognized from the beginning that this gift, when misused, can be destructive. The 1988 General Conference resolution establishing our Committee reminds us that human sexuality "can contribute both to fulfillment and to brokenness among imperfect people." <sup>17</sup> The Social Principles contain a variety of warnings about misuse of the gift of sexuality. It would be difficult to justify a totally permissive approach to human sexual expression, even among consenting adults, without recasting much of the church's existing teaching. Even sexual relationships among consenting adults can be mutually exploitative and dehumanizing; that is almost true by definition of prostitution. Rape can even occur within marriage. Dehumanizing, exploitative sexual relationships can be a form of idolatry, alienating one from deeper relationships with God and other persons. A sexually promiscuous pattern of behavior can be disintegrative, leading one away from genuine fulfillment in love. These dangers are all the more clearly present in the exploitation of children and young people, against which the Social Principles specifically warn.

While human sexual expression exists at different levels in the rich interplay of social relationships, a serious moral case can be made for reserving sexual intercourse for permanent covenantal unions between persons who are exclusively pledged to one another. In such unions, the depth of unqualified love offered by each to each can become a human manifestation of that grace by which we are made whole.

What is the bearing of this upon the issue of homosexuality? To the extent that homosexual persons have multiple sexual partners, their behavior is in conflict with Christian teaching. We are impressed by the number of persons of homosexual orientation who affirmed that principle in testimony before the Committee. If heterosexual promiscuity is criticized by the church, the same attitude should apply to homosexual promiscuity. A number of witnesses, including gays and ex-gays, lesbians and ex-lesbians, spoke to us of the emptiness and destructiveness of a promiscuous lifestyle. Those who have maintained same-sex committed unions over a period of years testified to the humanizing, mutually fulfilling character of these relationships.

## *The Treatment Accorded Homosexual Persons in Society and Church*

In conversations with numbers of persons of homosexual orientation, the Committee has been struck by their accounts of continuing oppression within this society. The Committee also heard testimony regarding unjust treatment of homosexual persons in the Philippines, indicating this is not a problem confined to the United States. Incidents of unprovoked violence continue to be reported, and the denial of basic civil rights is not uncommon. The latter includes discrimination against homosexuals in employment, medical visitation, and child custody and denial of protection of inheritance. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church include the insistence "that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured."<sup>18</sup> We believe that United Methodists wish to be sensitive to the basic civil rights of all, regardless of sexual orientation.

But more needs to be said. The persistence of discrimination and the continuing violence bespeak unresolved emotional conflicts within many people. Why else would people respond with such anger toward those who have done them no harm? This appears to be a problem within the life of the church as well as in society at large. We have heard moving accounts of genuine Christian acceptance and hospitality for homosexual persons in many United Methodist churches. But we have also heard testimony from gay and lesbian persons who felt themselves to be stigmatized and ostracized within our churches. Some have concluded that the church's overall stance on homosexuality has contributed to the stigma, thereby justifying repressive attitudes and actions. A few pastors have frankly told us of their unwillingness even to receive practicing homosexuals into church membership. On such matters, the church clearly is on trial. It has been said that the church is called to be "a voice for those who have no voice" and a home where everyone "will be at home." As a voice, the church must be an advocate for the human rights of people suffering from repression. As a home, the church must be warmly hospitable to all persons, while also being a community for moral discernment.

### **IV. What Can Be Known About Homosexuality?**

In addressing theological and ethical questions about homosexuality, the church's work must be factually grounded and thoughtfully reasoned. Recognizing this, the General Conference instructed the General Council on Ministries in its studies to "seek the best biological, psychological, and sociological infor-

mation and opinion on the nature of homosexuality, noting points at which there is a consensus among informed scientists and where there is not." <sup>19</sup> Our mandate also suggested the use of consultants, as deemed appropriate.

In order to fulfill this mandate, the Committee selected consultants who represented a broad variety of scientifically informed perspectives, chosen on the basis of recognized competence and diversity of viewpoint. In addition, the Committee conducted an extensive review of scientific literature.

### *How Can Science Inform Our Understanding of Homosexuality?*

As this Committee's investigations began, members holding deeply conflicting viewpoints about the nature and meaning of homosexuality were hopeful that science could provide definitive answers to questions that trouble the church. We hoped that scientific facts could settle our debates, once and for all. For instance, we expected to find answers to such questions as, What causes homosexuality? Can sexual orientation be changed?

Our expectations were to be disappointed. A major insight we have gained together is that complexities of human nature and behavior cannot be reduced to such an elementary level. Our consultants reminded us that scientific answers are seldom, if ever, absolute and that science cannot be used to "prove" moral conclusions. They also reminded us that the questions we fail to ask can be as significant as those we put to scientists. For example, in asking about the causes of sexual orientation we may overlook asking about the reasons for prejudice, repression, and violence. Moreover, our consultants noted that the value or disvalue a society places on a human characteristic is not usually determined by its scientific understanding of the causes of the condition. (For example, scientific knowledge of the variations in skin pigmentation does not explain racial prejudice.)

An initial complication the Committee faced was the lack of a consistent definition of homosexuality among scientists. While we in the church may assume that the meaning of the word is obvious, scientists convinced us that such is not the case. Definitions vary cross-culturally, across scientific disciplines, and even throughout the history of Western culture. For example, the definition of *sodomy* in certain historical periods included sexual relations with beasts and with Gentiles because both were "unclean." Describing homosexuality as part of a person's identity is a relatively new concept that would not be understood in many other places and times. Homosexual "practice" or "practices" also vary greatly in definition. While these complications were frustrating, they did serve to illuminate other uncertainties

facing the Committee. The Committee also found substantial disagreement about what constitutes "normal" sexual behavior. Statistical normality is defined as most frequently observed behavior. Another method of defining "normalcy" is to observe and judge the consequences of a particular human behavior. For example, one may ask, "Does this behavior cause any harm to the person who engages in it or to anyone else?" Or normal behavior can be defined as that which conforms to a prescribed set of religious or cultural values that may or may not take into account either the frequency or the consequences of the behavior.

### *The Causes and Changeability of Sexual Orientation*

Though there is no definitive answer to the question of causation, some helpful information is available. Most authorities suggest that the causes are probably complex and difficult to determine. There is also considerable agreement that it is a mistake to treat physiological and social/psychological factors as totally distinct from each other. There has been a long-standing debate between those who seek physical causes ("nature") and those who look for causes in the social and psychological environment ("nurture"). Increasingly this "nature" vs. "nurture" dichotomy is seen by sophisticated students of sexual orientation to be a false one. That appears to be a misplaced debate.

Current research includes studies in genetics, prenatal influences, brain differences, hormonal levels, other biological factors, and psychological, social, and cultural influences. None of these avenues of investigation has yielded conclusive, replicable results, though some may show more promise than others. No one theory of the origin and nature of homosexuality is persuasive enough to command a consensus among reputable scientists. However, the evidence before the Committee strongly indicated that sexual orientation, however determined, is established early, and that change, when possible, is difficult.

We did find a consensus among scientists that nobody knows how to create a human being's sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual. They pointed out that there is no evidence to suggest that deliberate role modeling by parents or teachers or others who seek to exert influence over persons can be the significant cause of a person's sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Without real clarity on the question of causation, it is similarly difficult to conclude whether homosexual orientation can or cannot be changed.

## *Findings About Changeability of Sexual Behavior*

Scientists can speak more definitively about behavior, since it is observable and verifiable. There is clear evidence that sexual *behavior* can be influenced by a number of methods, including coercion, change in ideological or religious perspective, altered circumstances such as imprisonment, or spontaneously for reasons that are not understood. Such behavioral changes may occur either from heterosexual to homosexual behavior or the other way around.

The scientific experts consulted by the Committee did not venture, as scientists, to make authoritative ethical judgments. But it is noteworthy that all of them regard the use of physical or mental coercion in order to change a person's private sexual life as unethical and inadvisable. Coercion here includes violence and physical force, teasing, and social pressures such as ostracizing or "brainwashing."

There was some difference of opinion as to whether it is advisable to use noncoercive means to encourage, aid, or assist another person in changing sexual orientation. Some authorities believe that such efforts do serious damage to the self-esteem and well-being of those who try to change, many unsuccessfully. Others believe that a person who seeks help to effect such a change deserves help and support. Women and men may react differently to orientation-changing therapies. One authority reported that some women may be responsive to such treatment.

### *Life Patterns*

Scholarly investigation shows that there is as great a diversity of lifestyles among homosexual persons as among heterosexual persons.

- Monogamy exists among homosexual as well as heterosexual couples, despite the obvious difficulties. Contemporary society places all committed, long-term relationships under considerable stress. Barriers to stable homosexual unions are more numerous, including social pressure and legal codes that make it especially difficult for two persons of the same sex to legitimate their relationship.
- According to current research results, there is no difference in parenting effectiveness that can be attributed to the sexual orientation of the parents.
- There is strong indication that culturally learned gender roles are more relevant to lifestyle choices than is sexual orientation. Thus gay men's lifestyles are more like straight men's than like

lesbians'. Lesbians' lifestyles are more like straight women's than like gay men's.

- There is no indication homosexual men are any more likely to commit sexual violence than heterosexual men. There is evidence that most sexual violence is committed by men and that the victims are usually women and children.
- There are strong indications that having multiple sexual partners exacerbates the spread of sexually transmitted disease. This is as true for heterosexuals as for homosexuals.
- Inherent in all forms of sexual behavior is the potential for physical as well as psychological abuse inflicted by one partner upon another. Physical abuse of women and children by heterosexual men is a matter of increasing concern within our society. Public concern about male homosexual abuse focuses on abusive anal intercourse and on the spread of AIDS affecting the gay population.

Much of the concern about sexual abuse focuses on the practice of anal intercourse and the potentially destructive consequences through abrasion, penetration of rectal lining, and sexually transmitted diseases. Due to the delicate nature of the anal canal and rectum, there are numerous problems that can arise from practices associated with anal erotic activity. Infections, trauma, and tumors are a definite risk for those who engage in these practices. Some medical authorities, however, report that consensual penial, anal intercourse can be performed safely when adequate precautions were taken. Multiple sexual partners and unsafe sex practices increase the health risk of the persons who engage in them.

### *The Church's Own Experience*

The church's access to knowledge about homosexuality is not limited to scientific studies, important as they are in clarifying our understanding. Many homosexual persons are already active members of local churches throughout the denomination. Insights can be gained through the church's experience with gay and lesbian persons in its midst. Do homosexual persons manifest the "fruit of the Spirit"? Is their faith mature and growing? Do they behave in unselfish, caring ways? Do they serve gladly and creatively? Do they practice self-discipline?

The fact that homosexuality has been so generally stigmatized within the church makes it more difficult to answer such questions, for we often do not know who the gays and lesbians are! In the course of its investigations, the Committee talked with and received communications from such persons who fear rejection should their sexual orientation be known.

Nevertheless, it seems evident to us that almost any generalization about the faith and mature Christian life of heterosexual church members can be applied to homosexual members as well. We have been struck by the numbers of reported instances in which this or that local church or annual conference has suddenly discovered that some highly treasured member or leader has been gay or lesbian all long. Sometimes the revelation has included evidence of an unwholesome secret life, prompting reassessment of a person's character and Christian profession. But there have been many instances where such persons have exhibited healthy and growing Christian discipleship, complicated only by fear of rejection. Most gays and lesbians in the church, like heterosexuals, are neither notorious sinners nor faultless saints. But the number of homosexual persons who truly manifest the fruit of the Spirit cannot be ignored by an honest inquiry into the church's own experience with this phenomenon.

## V. What Can the Church Teach Responsibly?

When the church takes its role as moral teacher seriously, it can make unique contributions to wholeness of faith among its members and to the general enlightenment of a confused world. When it takes that role lightly or subordinates it to unworthy ends, it undermines the church's integrity and subjects it to disrespect in society at large.

Responsible teaching is teaching that is accountable to truth about the faith we profess and truth about the reality we are examining. Responsible teaching is willing, even eager, to abandon claims that are not in harmony with the faith we profess or that bear false witness about the reality we are examining. It limits itself to conclusions that are solidly and clearly grounded.

In light of this study, what can the church responsibly teach?

### *The Central Affirmations*

The church has always taught that God is love. This means that our first word about and to homosexual persons is that we are all loved by God, Christ died for us all, and that, as the Social Principles affirm, "God's grace is available to all."<sup>20</sup> To say that first word is also to remember that in addressing itself to gay and lesbian persons the first concern must be for the well-being of those persons themselves. That is true whether the church eventually concludes that homosexual behavior is or is not consistent with Christian teaching. Remembering this first word of God's grace can spare the church from unfeeling moralism and self-righteousness. At the very least, our moral stance must

never be misunderstood as approval of repression or violence against homosexual persons.

By affirming that "sexuality is God's good gift to all persons,"<sup>21</sup> the United Methodist Social Principles helpfully link God's love for humanity to God's work of creation. In calling upon human beings to be disciplined and loving in their use of this gift, the Principles remind us that we manifest this gift of grace through responsible life. Disciplined, caring human expressions of the gift of sexuality are important for homosexual as well as heterosexual persons.

The Committee has been struck by the testimony of those United Methodists who fear that any new openness toward homosexual persons might lead to an erosion of Christian standards of human sexual expression. To guard against such erosion, the church must express persuasively as a minimum standard its teaching that sexual relations should be in the context of responsible, committed, monogamous, loving adult relationships and that sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and unsafe forms of sexual gratification should be rejected. The strength of the church's standards is rooted in the nature of God's gracious love.

### *How Significant a Moral Issue Is Homosexuality?*

The church can also strive for a better sense of proportionality about the subject. As a Committee, we have been impressed by the extraordinary passion with which the controversy over homosexuality has been conducted. More than one of us has voiced doubts, from time to time, about whether this issue is important enough to justify such energy and attention in a world riven by violence, afflicted by disease and drugs, blighted by hunger and poverty, and oppressed by racism, sexism, and tyranny. Yet, when one faces the passionate character of the dispute within the church and the human suffering around this issue, we believe the study process to be clearly justified. The issue needs to be resolved not only for the sake of the health of the church, but also for the well-being of so many people who are personally and deeply affected.

Nevertheless, the question of proportionality must also be addressed. A question that may serve to lower the level of conflict within the church can be asked this way: If homosexual practice is sinful, just how important is this particular form of sin?

All sins may be an expression of Original Sin. But the United Methodist doctrine of Sanctification clearly implies that there are degrees of sinfulness among Christians in whom grace is also at work. If small moral problems are treated with the same seriousness as weightier moral issues, then how can the church muster



the energy and conviction to deal with the truly great evils of this age?

Those who wish the church to teach that homosexual practice is sinful must therefore attend to this question of degree. If it is sinful, just *how* sinful is it? Are we to understand this to be a fundamental flaw at the very core of the being of the gay or lesbian person, fatally and massively ruining his or her relationship with God and fellow humanity? Or are we to understand it as a relatively minor flaw? Or is it somewhere in between?

As we have already noted, most of the Christian ethicists who have written about homosexuality within the past generation do not treat this as a major moral question, if it is a question at all. Those who do not believe homosexuality is a sin may raise a question about the degree of sinfulness involved in discriminating against homosexual persons.

### *Things the Church Can Responsibly Teach*

In order to bring the results of our study into sharper focus, it may help to summarize our conclusions about some of the specific points we believe the church can responsibly teach on the subject of homosexuality.

- Homosexuality is best considered in the context of a more general Christian understanding of human sexuality.
- Human sexuality is God's good gift. Our fundamental attitude toward this gift should be more one of gratitude than of apprehension.
- In the expression of our sexuality—as in the expression of all aspects of our existence, we are invited by God's grace to a life of love and self-discipline.
- Sexual expression is most profoundly human when it takes place in the context of a caring and committed relationship where each partner can be an expression of God's grace for the other.
- There are substantial numbers of persons of homosexual orientation within the church whose gifts and graces manifest the work of the Spirit among us.
- The specific causes of homosexual orientation remain unclear, although various scientific theories about this contribute to our overall understanding.
- It is a responsible expression of Christian ethics to advocate for those things that minimize the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and to support work toward adequate health care and research in these areas.
- The basic human rights of gay and lesbian persons should be protected by the church, and the general stigmatizing of such

persons is inappropriate in a church that understands all its members to be sinners who live by the power of God's grace.

- In the church's own dialogue on this as well as other controversial issues, persons of conflicting viewpoint should respect one another, recognizing that before the mystery of God, our knowledge and insight remain partial and imperfect.

### *Things the Church Cannot Responsibly Teach*

In the course of its study, the Committee has noted that advocates of various sides of the debate sometimes use arguments that ultimately cannot be supported. It may be helpful to review some of these:

- The church cannot teach that the Bible is indifferent to homosexual acts. Although there are only a few passages where such are in view, in every one of those passages a negative judgment about homosexual practice is either stated or presumed.
- The church cannot teach that all biblical references and allusions to sexual practices are binding today *just* because they are in the Bible. Specific references and allusions must be examined in light of the basic biblical witness and their respective sociocultural contexts.
- The church cannot teach that certain sexual behaviors are morally acceptable just because they are practiced by substantial numbers of people, nor just because it corresponds to their subjective inclinations. Not all expressions of sexuality can be affirmed by the church as moral or life-enhancing. The basis of moral judgments among Christians is deeper than statistical headcounts or subjective feelings—even though statistical studies and subjective reports can be an important part of the process of forming moral judgments. This applies to both heterosexual and homosexual practices.
- The church cannot teach that gay and lesbian persons are generally dysfunctional or characteristically preoccupied with sex—some are and some are not, just like their heterosexual counterparts.
- The church cannot teach that gay and lesbian persons are prone to seduce or corrupt others—some are and some are not, again, just like their heterosexual counterparts.
- The church cannot teach that the same percentage of every society is gay or lesbian. That is not borne out in the limited reputable cross-cultural studies. It does appear that homosexual relations exist in some form in all cultures studied.
- The church cannot teach that sexual orientation is fixed before birth, nor can it teach that it is fixed only after birth. The scientific evidence is insufficient to allow a judgment either way,

particularly considering the diverse types of both heterosexuality and homosexuality.

- The church cannot teach that sexual orientation, either heterosexual or homosexual, is deliberately chosen. It is clear that substantial numbers of persons have experienced their sexual orientation from early childhood.
- The church cannot teach that there is a single theory of homosexual orientation or behavior—or, for that matter, of heterosexual orientation or behavior. No one theory is sufficiently supported by empirical evidence to be taught as generally accepted truth.
- The church cannot affirm any sexual practice, heterosexual or homosexual, that is exploitative, casual, or physically threatening.

### *Differences Within the Committee*

There are various questions on which the Committee itself has been unable to achieve a consensus. It may be helpful to summarize some of the key differences.

- We do not have consensus on the relative weight to be given to the four theological sources in the Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason), although we agree that each is important, and we agree on the primacy of Scripture.
- We do not have consensus on whether homosexual practice is a major biblical topic nor whether, if homosexual practice is to be listed as an expression of sin, what weight or importance should be given to it in the church's teaching. Some members of the Committee believe that it is a major biblical topic. Some believe that it is an expression of sin. Most members of the Committee believe that it is not a major biblical topic. Most believe that it is not necessarily an expression of sin.
- We do not have consensus on the degree to which the seven biblical references and allusions to homosexual practice reflect the basic biblical witness. Some members of the Committee believe that these passages reflect the will of God for all time. Most members of the Committee believe that they reflect historical and cultural realities that should not be generalized as moral teaching for our time.
- Some members of the Committee believe that the creation accounts in Genesis express the will of God prescribing heterosexual marriage as the norm for all sexual relationships. Most members of the Committee believe that the Genesis creation accounts are attempts to explain the way things are, not to prescribe what they should be, and that nothing is implied about the normative character of heterosexuality or about monogamy.

- We do not have consensus on whether the seven biblical references and allusions to homosexual practice presuppose the Genesis creation accounts as their theological foundation. Most members of the Committee believe that they do not. Some members of the Committee believe that they do.
- We do not have consensus on whether the existence of a common thread of specific biblical references or allusions to a subject such as homosexual practice constitutes, by itself, a sufficient basis for a moral norm. Most members of the Committee believe that it does not. Some members of the Committee believe that it does.
- We do not have consensus on how the priority of grace to law should be expressed in relation to teaching on homosexuality.
- We do not have consensus on which are acceptable moral options for persons of homosexual orientation. Some of the members of the Committee believe that such persons should be committed to a life of celibacy, or else seek transformation to heterosexual orientation. Most members of the Committee believe that they might as Christians enter into committed same-sex monogamous relationships.
- We do not have consensus on the weight we should give scientific evidence in arriving at moral judgment.

*How Should the Church Deal With Unresolved  
and Unresolvable Questions Related to Homosexuality?*

While our study has led us to important conclusions and points of consensus, we must also acknowledge that we are left with unresolvable questions and disagreements. The Committee does not believe this is because it did not have time to go into issues and data thoroughly enough. We believe it is because the evidence and understanding on the subject is not definitive and because there remain important differences of viewpoint among us.

We have therefore had to address the possibility that no study process will be able to answer all the important questions conclusively, or bridge all the differences soon. What are the moral implications of these continuing uncertainties and differences of viewpoint?

Faced with uncertainty and disagreement, all of us are likely to give the "benefit of the doubt" to some conclusions against others, thereby placing the burden of proof against contrary views. Some will resolve uncertainties by acting on the basis of the specific biblical references and allusions to homosexual practice. For others, homosexual practice will continue to be condemned morally until scientific evidence and the evidence of

Christian experience clearly show that those references and allusions are not a sufficient expression of Christian faith in this area.

Others will conclude that in the absence of conclusive evidence that homosexual practice is pathological or sinful, the church should be cautious in applying sanctions against it. For such Christians, the burden of proof will be against singling out homosexual practice for unusual church condemnation or discipline. They may cite the well-known story of Gamaliel, who advised against persecuting the Christians: "If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:38b-39, New Revised Standard Version). The supposition here is that further experience may be needed to clarify the truth and that in the meantime it is a mistake to make premature judgments that may alienate or injure people.

Still others, including the majority of the Committee and in spite of the uncertainties, conclude that certain assertions are true: a) the seven biblical references and allusions cannot be taken as definitive for Christian teaching about homosexual practice because they represent cultural patterns of ancient society and not the will of God; b) the scientific evidence is sufficient to support the contention that homosexuality is not pathological or otherwise an inversion, developmental failure, or deviant form of life as such, but is rather a human variant, one that can be healthy and whole; c) the emerging scholarly views in biblical studies, ethics, and theology support a view that affirms homosexual relationships that are covenantal, committed, and monogamous; and d) the witness to God's grace of lesbian and gay Christians in the life of the church supports these conclusions.

### *Implications for the Social Principles*

In light of all this, the Committee as a whole endorses much of the material contained in the sections of the Social Principles dealing with sexuality. We affirm sexuality as God's good gift while noting, with the Principles, that there is need for a more "determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely."<sup>22</sup>

In respect to homosexuality, the Committee proposes changes in language reflecting the results of its study and acknowledging that there is principled division within the church on this subject. The following sentences are suggested as substitute for the last two sentences of Paragraph 71F on *Human Sexuality*, but we differ on what should be said at the point marked "INSERTION":

We acknowledge with humility that the church has been unable to arrive at a common mind on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian faith. Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it acceptable when practiced in a context of human covenantal faithfulness. (INSERTION) The church seeks further understanding through continued prayer, study, and pastoral experience. In doing so, the church continues to affirm that God's grace is bestowed on all, and that the members of Christ's body are called to be in ministry for and with one another, and to the world.

A majority of the Committee would add the following sentence at the point marked "INSERTION":

The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice.

A minority of the Committee would substitute the following sentences at the point marked "INSERTION":

The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly alter its previously held position that we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.

Thus, both the Committee's majority and its minority acknowledge that the church has not been able to arrive at a common mind on this subject and that the church needs to pursue greater knowledge and insight than it presently has on this subject.

In respect to civil rights, we propose the addition of the following as a new subsection G in Paragraph 72 of the Social Principles, with the present 72G and other subsections retained and renumbered appropriately:

*G) Rights of Homosexual Persons.* Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims in same-sex relationships where they have: shared

material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships which involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians.

## VI. Implications for the Life and Ministry of the Church

Among the many possible implications of this study for the life and ministry of the church, the Committee wishes to single out three: (1) the need for more sensitive pastoral care for persons of homosexual orientation, their families and friends, (2) the need for churchwide study of homosexuality, and (3) the need for greater openness and humility in the ongoing debate.

(1) *Implications for Pastoral Care.* We have been impressed over and over again by the deep trauma and tragedy brought to so many families when a member of that family has become known as gay or lesbian. In some cases it has split families leading to lasting estrangement and permanent damage, parents alienated from their children and children forsaking their parents. In most cases revelations, sometimes including revelations about the tragedy of AIDS, have brought these families loss of face, the subtle but stinging assaults of community gossip, and an ecology of hurt. Even in cases where gays and lesbians practice a celibate life, they remain objects of scorn and ridicule, the butt of endless jokes, the recipients of a barrage of indignities, the focus of a systemic and sustained insulation of relationships that leaves them "outside" of family, associates, community groups and, yes, churches.

At these places of such enormous pain, surely there is a compelling call for pastoral care and for the church as a community of compassion and healing. Deep in our heart we believe that God's love is unlimited, God's embrace unrestricted, and that God's grace is freely available to all. In response to God we believe that the church is to be a place of acceptance and hospitality to all persons, a home for those who have no home.

The church as a community of grace can be a place for congregational care, pastoral counseling, support groups, and small group life dedicated to touch the struggles of families and of gay and lesbian persons. The hospitality of the church can be a witness to God's love and a counter-community to the hostilities and fears of the wider society.

We do confess even here, however, a difference of principle within our Committee. The nature of the church's ministry to gay and lesbian persons and their families is partly dependent

on the church's moral judgment on homosexual practice. It is precisely here that our Committee is of one heart, but two minds.

Those who consider homosexual practice incompatible with God's will therefore regard it as detrimental to the individuals involved. Nevertheless, out of love and compassionate concern, those taking this position can be expected to be caring and accepting of homosexual persons while, at the same time, seeking to influence a change in their sexual behavior. Where a change to a heterosexual lifestyle cannot be effected, such a pastoral ministry would endeavor to help homosexual persons embrace a life of sexual abstinence. The church is encouraged to be a place where gay and lesbian persons and their families can find support and healing in their struggle with homosexuality.

Those who are convinced that homosexual orientation and covenantal practice are in accord with God's will believe that homosexual relationships need not be detrimental but may be faithful expressions of God's grace. They can be expected to be supportive of those who through such relationships seek to express their love for one another in mutually constructive and fulfilling ways. Their ministry will address the estrangements frequently encountered between homosexual persons and their families, while providing a supportive community where gay and lesbian persons are encouraged to accept and love themselves as the persons God created them to be.

(2) *The Need for Further Study.* The intensity of feelings generated by the controversy in the life of the church plainly points to the need for more education and dialogue. The development of a churchwide educational program on this issue is beyond the Committee's specific mandate and the time at its disposal, but most of the Committee thinks it is essential. The Committee's experience with a combination of study, consultation, and dialogue provides a model for possibilities at other levels of the church's life. Moreover, the Committee has generated a variety of studies and bibliographies that could prove useful. Audio-tapes of the sessions with consultants and witnesses could be edited for wider distribution. Such study would provide encouragement to our church members and constituents to explore this reality in light of their faith as we have sought to do.

(3) *The Need for Greater Openness and Humility.* We think our experience as a Committee also has implications for how the church should engage in controversy on divisive issues like this one. We have gone about our work as honestly and fairly as possible, but it has not always been easy. Sometimes our discussion has become heated. In the end we have found that it is possible to disagree earnestly with one another without breaking the bonds of a growing mutual respect and affection.



We have also learned together that we do not have to have all of the answers to questions before us in order to keep faith with our profession as Christians. We have had to acknowledge that many of the uncertainties cannot yet be overcome and that many of the perceived certainties cannot be supported. But that may, in itself, have a message for the church. Perhaps we can be less polarized in our discussion on this issue, more humble about our own positions, and more open to the human realities in our midst.

### **Implementing Recommendations for the Committee's Report**

The Committee to Study Homosexuality respectfully requests that the General Council on Ministries submit the following recommendations to the 1992 General Conference:

1. We recommend that the 1992 General Conference receive the Study of Homosexuality conducted by the General Council on Ministries during the 1989-92 quadrennium, and make it available for study and use across the whole church. An annotated bibliography is to be added to this report.

2. We recommend the development of resources consistent with the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church which support ministry to and with homosexual persons by individuals, groups, local churches, annual conferences, and the general church, with the understanding that these resources will reflect diversities of informed viewpoints.

3. To this end, we recommend that The United Methodist Publishing House develop these study materials and resources.

4. We also recommend that the 1992 General Conference establish an Advisory Committee of eight (8) persons representing diverse points of view, including scholars, pastors, and educators, to consult and work with The United Methodist Publishing House in the development of the resource and study materials recommended above. This Advisory Committee will be named by the Council of Bishops, and will be funded by The United Methodist Publishing House.

5. We recommend that a new paragraph be added to the Social Principles following present Paragraph 71F (such addition to become Paragraph 71G, and present Paragraph 71G and following to be relettered accordingly):

*"G) Rights of Homosexual Persons.* Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have: shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney and other

such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships which involve shared contributions, responsibilities and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians."

Respectfully Submitted,  
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 25, 1972, p. 484, Calendar Item 444, Petition A-5753 and April 28, 1972, pp. 707–709.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 28, 1972, pp. 712–713, Calendar Item 444, Petition A-5753.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, May 5, 1976, p. 498 and p. 979, Calendar Item 559, Petition G-1196.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, May 8, 1976, p. 617 and p. 979, Calendar Item 933, Petitions G-1250 through G-1298, G-1464.

<sup>6</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, May 8, 1976, p. 621 and p. 979, Calendar Item 971, Petition 1199.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 19, 1980, pp. 306–307 and pp. 578–579, Calendar Item 124, Petition D-01055.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1984, Para. 402.2, p. 189 and Para. 404.4, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1984, Para. 402.2, p. 189.

<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 69, pp. 81–83.

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 69, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 30, 1988, pp. 183–184, Calendar Item 348, Petition 341.

<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1988, Para. 71F, p. 95.

# Definitions

*A shared understanding of the following terms will facilitate discussion of homosexuality.*

**Sex:** In its narrow sense, the gender of a person; the genital organs and action between people that involves those organs; sexual intercourse.

**Sexuality:** A broader term referring to the whole spectrum of human behavior that includes a person's thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as well as sexual practices; the way a person expresses maleness or femaleness.

**Heterosexual:** An adjective referring to a person who is erotically and romantically attracted by persons of the opposite sex. Heterosexual persons are often referred to as "straight" when sexual orientation is discussed.

**Homosexual:** An adjective referring to a person who is erotically and romantically attracted by persons of the same sex. *Homosexual* is most properly used as an adjective (hence one speaks of a homosexual person). However, in ordinary usage the word is also used as a noun: "We met a couple of homosexuals out walking."

**Same-sex:** Some homosexual persons find *homosexual* an unfriendly word and prefer to speak of people with same-sex or same-gender attractions. Like *homosexual*, this term is best used as an adjective.

**Bisexual:** An adjective referring to a person who can be erotically and romantically attracted by persons of their own sex as well as persons of the opposite sex.

**Gay:** Person who is erotically and romantically attracted by persons of the same sex. *Gay* is usually used of male homosexuals, but sometimes of both males and females. *Gay* was in use in thirteenth-century France, and thus predates *homosexual*, which was first used in the late nineteenth century.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is erotically and romantically attracted to other women. *Lesbian* can be used as an adjective, as in "She has a lesbian daughter," or as a noun, as in "I am a lesbian."

**Closeted:** A gay or lesbian person who keeps his or her sexual orientation hidden, fostering the assumption that he or she is heterosexual.

**Coming Out:** Revealing one's sexual orientation. Many gay and lesbian persons come out gradually, first revealing their orientation to one or two persons, then to a few others, and eventually to everyone who knows them. However, the hardest part, according to the testimony of many same-gender-attracted persons, is the first one—the difficult step of coming out to oneself.

*People who are not well informed about the general topic of human sexuality often assume that persons of the following groups are gay. Usually they are not.*

**Transsexual:** Persons (usually men) who habitually think of themselves as members of the opposite sex. Some of them go to the extent of seeking sex-change surgery. Some of them speak of feeling like “a woman trapped in a man's body.” Most transsexuals feel that they have nothing in common with gay men and are not attracted to them. Instead they are likely to be attracted by married heterosexual males.

**Transvestite:** Also called “cross-dresser.” Persons who enjoy wearing the clothing of the opposite sex. Transvestite men enjoy wearing women's clothes, usually in private. Most of them are *not* gay and many are married. (One explanation of reasons for this is that men in our society are more restricted than women in societally approved type of dress. Women, for example, are free to wear jeans, slacks, suits, and ties as well as flowered dresses.)

**Pedophile:** An adult who is sexually attracted to young children. This includes both male and female adults. The attraction may be to children of the opposite sex or of their own sex. Some who are attracted to children of their own sex behave heterosexually with adults.

# Stories the Committee Heard

The following summaries are from stories told during the oral presentation of the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality to the General Council on Ministries. They are for use in Lesson 2, along with thirteen brief accounts of “typical experiences,” which are found in the text of the Report, printed on pages 14–15 of this study book.

14. A pastor, father of a lesbian, told of his three-year struggle with his wife and daughter when they learned the daughter was a lesbian. He was raised in the south, went to Southern Baptist schools, and was very conservative. He said he bargained with God, his daughter, and the church, but finally came to accept her as she is. They have a good relationship; his only regret is that she is not in his church. She is very religious but could not find a place within The United Methodist Church, in which she was raised.
15. The mother of a gay son—a doctor in Washington, D.C.—had raised him in the church and was active in the church all her life. She went to a church meeting involving a presentation on homosexuality. When the question period began, the first question was, How can we stop this perverted behavior? She knew her son was not perverted. She was very proud of him. He’s an active member of the family. She left the church that day knowing she could not be a part of a church that chooses only a few. She said, in tears, “And now we are nothing.” She was unable to continue speaking.
16. One clergyman’s position is that he believes change is possible. The promiscuity among homosexuals is stunning to him. It would be considered sick if we observed it in heterosexuals. He said that he hoped that the committee would find that Scripture was confirmed by life and that homosexuality is not part of God’s gift of sexuality to folks nor in God’s plan for us.

17. One man spoke to the committee and said that he didn't care what the committee did. He had left the gay lifestyle five years ago and felt that the Spirit of God called him out of homosexuality.
18. A seventy-three-year-old man, active in the church throughout his life, had held many leadership positions. As a gay man, he went through life unfulfilled and felt that throughout his life he had one hand tied behind his back. On behalf of young United Methodists, he urged the committee to encourage them to accept themselves and the church to accept them.
19. "My family partner, Elly, and I were at a lunch of this committee. At the table were two clergymen, each serving different churches. They told us that they would not accept Elly and me as members in their church. One further said that he would also deny membership to a heterosexual couple living together without marriage. So my partner, being quick, said, 'Will you marry us?' He replied, 'No, I can't do that.' Then Elly said, 'Then what is our option?' He shrugged and did not reply."
20. After months of trying to work things out, a young woman and her same-sex partner have decided to separate. Seeking spiritual comfort, the young woman attends worship. There the pastor announces that a support group is being formed for people who are going through divorce. Though she longs to join the group, she does not dare make her lesbian identity public. She continues to struggle with her sense of loss, unsupported by her church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While the first nineteen stories are reported from the General Council on Ministries Committee, this one is from testimony given to the Minnesota Task Force to Study Ministries with and for Homosexual Persons.

# Sources and Criteria for Our Theological Task <sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death.

.....

We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.

We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. . . .

.....

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. . . .

.....

## Tradition

The theological task does not start anew in each age or each person. Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present as though nothing were to be learned from that great cloud of witnesses in between. For centuries Christians have sought to interpret the truth of the gospel for their time.

.....

A critical appreciation of these [our] traditions can compel us to think about God in new ways, enlarge our vision of shalom, and enhance our confidence in God's provident love.

.....



## Experience

.....

Our experience interacts with Scripture. We read Scripture in light of the conditions and events that help shape who we are, and we interpret our experience in terms of Scripture.

All religious experience affects all human experience; all human experience affects our understanding of religious experience.

.....

Although profoundly personal, Christian experience is also corporate; our theological task is informed by the experience of the Church and by the common experiences of all humanity. In our attempts to understand the biblical message, we recognize that God's gift of liberating love embraces the whole of creation.

.....

## Reason

Although we recognize that God's revelation and our experiences of God's grace continually surpass the scope of human language and reason, we also believe that any disciplined theological work calls for the careful use of reason.

.....

... We seek nothing less than a total view of reality that is decisively informed by the promises and imperatives of the Christian gospel, though we know well that such an attempt will always be marred by the limits and distortions characteristic of human knowledge.

Nevertheless, by our quest for reasoned understandings of Christian faith we seek to grasp, express, and live out the gospel in a way that will commend itself to thoughtful persons who are seeking to know and follow God's ways.

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<sup>1</sup> From "Our Theological Task," *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*—1992, Paragraph 68; pages 77–82. Copyright © 1992 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

# Interpretation of Scripture

The Bible passages most frequently referred to in discussion of homosexuality are discussed below. For each passage, a summary of a traditional interpretation is presented followed by a summary of an alternative interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Readers are encouraged to study these passages more deeply on their own, using sources mentioned in the bibliography on pages 58–64 as well as commentaries and other Bible reference books.

You may wish to prepare by reading the excerpts printed on pages 46–47 from “Sources and Criteria for Our Theological Task.” Also, be sure to read the section “The Importance of Biblical Grounding” in the Report, pages 16–18 in this study book.

Please keep in mind that this section seeks to present two quite different ways in which these texts are understood without advocating either way. Committee members found themselves disagreeing over how to understand these Bible passages even while all took the Bible with utmost seriousness. Christians of sincere faith and integrity disagree.

## 1. Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19:1-30.

These stories are similar and often treated as one, although they occur in two different settings. We will focus on the Genesis story.

*Traditional:* The Genesis story tells about an attempted male homosexual gang rape. This sin seals God’s judgment upon the city of Sodom. God, knowing Sodom’s wickedness, sends two visiting angels. When they are threatened, God destroys the town and its inhabitants (Genesis 19:24-28).

*Alternative:* This story is not about sex but about a threat in Sodom to violate strangers, who are guests of Lot. Many interpreters believe that the story was told to illustrate the evil of violating the ancient laws of hospitality. In a nomadic culture a stranger’s life might depend on another’s care. Hospitality laws were sacred. Two references to Sodom in other parts of Scripture (Ezekiel 16:49-50 and Matthew 10:14-15) reinforce the interpretation that Sodom’s sin was inhospitality.

## 2. Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13.

These passages are similar; their literal translation states that no male shall “lie the lyings of a woman.”

*Traditional:* The traditionalists’ view is “that homosexual acts violate the order of creation and divine will. As a consequence homosexual acts are an abomination. Laws that prohibit homosexual acts are not cultic or cultural but theological and revealed. Therefore they must be obeyed to honor the holiness of God.”<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 20:13 lists homosexual intercourse as one of a series of sexual offenses. Traditional interpreters believe that these moral laws still apply.

Many persons taking this perspective would state that God established an order of creation revealing divine will in creating human beings male and female in the image of God. Therefore the complementary nature of the two sexes was included in that which God declared good (Genesis 1:26-28). “It is unmistakably clear that *Jesus interprets the Genesis verse [2:24] to mean there is a sacred order of the sexes, which is grounded in creation itself, expresses God’s will for humankind (heterosexual, monogamous marriage) and provides the only context for sexual intercourse.* Thus marriage: is the union of one man (male) with one woman (female), . . . and is consummated by sexual intercourse (becoming one flesh).”<sup>3</sup>

*Alternative:* Homosexuality was strongly connected with pagan temple practices found in Palestine and elsewhere. It was called *toevah* (Hebrew for “abomination”), a word usually associated with something ritually unclean (such as eating pork, or having intercourse with a menstruating woman) rather than something intrinsically evil like murder or theft. According to John Boswell, “It [*toevah*, abomination] is used throughout the Old Testament to designate those Jewish sins which involve ethnic contamination or idolatry.”<sup>4</sup>

The Christian church early began evolving away from the Mosaic law, even in those sections that the Jews considered ethical (for example, Leviticus 19:9-10 on harvesting practices, or 20:9 on the execution of a rebellious son). This then raises the question whether the Levitical prohibition against male lying with male is still valid, or whether further evidence is needed.

More material regarding “lying the lyings of a woman” is included in the following discussions of New Testament passages.

### 3. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10

*Traditional:* In First Corinthians as well as in First Timothy, homosexual offenders are found in lists of persons committing actions unacceptable to God. "In this context, homosexual must be taken in its sexual sense of referring specifically to those engaged in homosexual oral or anal sexual acts. The sin then is doubly exposed. It is wrong to give oneself *both* to passive homosexual acts *and* to active homosexual acts.

"Following this harsh listing of sins for the Corinthian Christians, the apostle offers a reassuring word of hope (verse 11): Justification and sanctification are available through Christ, regardless of sins committed—if one repents. Sin, chaos, and immoral behaviors do not have to have the last word. The Gospel does, if we but hear." <sup>5</sup>

*Alternative:* The translation of the words used in these passages (*malakos* and *arsenokoitai*) is far from certain. Significantly, early church theologians who condemned homosexuality never refer to these passages because they knew the words did not refer to homosexuality as such. <sup>6</sup>

The distinction between passive homosexual acts and active ones underlines the cultural view of that time. Committee member Dr. Victor Furnish points out that in New Testament times to take the female, passive, role was considered taking an inferior position and therefore wrong for a man. The only position in intercourse thought appropriate for a man was to take the superior, insertive role.

This prejudice against a man taking a "womanly" or submissive position in sexual intercourse is still alive in some parts of the world. One contemporary reporter, collecting data about the homosexual culture in several countries around the world points out that in present-day Egypt the term *gay*, if used at all, is understood to mean a male taking the receptive role in anal sex. <sup>7</sup>

Robin Scroggs, Professor of New Testament at Union Seminary in New York, suggests that these passages may refer to either *pederasty* (sexual relations between a mature man and a boy) <sup>8</sup> or to the practice of male prostitution in pagan temples. <sup>9</sup>

### 4. Romans 1:26-27

This may be the most significant passage of Scripture dealing specifically with homosexuality. It is also the only one that mentions lesbianism.

*Traditional:* "The purpose of this passage is to identify the taproot of sin—namely, human idolatry and wickedness, our rebellion against God. . . . Today's readers of Romans 1–3 should be

aware of Paul's rhetorical devices and not become so captivated by them that we fail to understand the higher theological message: We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Only God's holiness, through Christ's grace, can save us from our sins. The cataloging of specific sins is a secondary device to underscore the major theological point."<sup>10</sup>

David Seamands states that Romans 1:18-32 "is the most important biblical reference because it places the issue in an explicitly theological context. Same-sex intercourse (both male and female) is clearly condemned. Paul does not say it is a greater sin than the others listed in vv. 29-31. But it is his *major illustration* of sin committed by human beings in rebellion against their Creator. . . . Homosexual practices are not the *cause* of the 'wrath of God' but the *consequence* of it. 'God gave them up' (vv. 24, 26, 28) to 'darkened minds' and to follow their own desires. As a result 'they exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural' (vv. 26-27) and indulged in same-sex intercourse."<sup>11</sup>

What did Jesus say? "While it is true that Jesus never mentions homosexuality in the Gospels, it is also true that whenever he speaks about human sexuality he presupposes heterosexuality. Thus in Matthew 5:27-28 he applies the law against adultery to his disciples by warning them not ever to look lustfully upon a woman (not a man)."<sup>12</sup> Jesus affirms God's intention at Creation when he discusses divorce (Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9).

*Alternative:* Several things are said in response to the Romans passage. The first is that no record exists in which Jesus said anything about homosexuality. Other points below consider "naturalness" and the abuse of the gift of sexuality.

1. *Natural versus unnatural.* This description of male and female homosexuality is set in the context of Paul's discussion of idolatry as practiced in Rome, where worship was evidently directed to "images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (Romans 1:23). As part of these rituals, the worshiper had intercourse with sacred prostitutes, both male and female. The important point to note is that the exchange of natural intercourse for unnatural was a result of their participation in these pagan rituals.<sup>13</sup> Paul probably had no concept of sexual orientation. If he assumed that everyone was "naturally" heterosexual, we can understand his opposition to homosexual acts as being unnatural.

We often read into Paul's use of the word *natural* the meanings that word carries in the twentieth century, but Paul used first-century meanings. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul argues that it is against nature for a woman to pray or prophesy (preach) without a veil, and that long hair on a male is unnatural.

Given what Paul knew of pederasty (sexual relations between a

mature man and a boy) in Greek culture and the impersonal homosexual activity of pagan temple worship, it is small wonder that he condemned the practices he mentioned in Romans 1:26-27.

2. *Abuse of the sexual gift.* Both heterosexual and homosexual persons can abuse the sexual gift. Sexual promiscuity and prostitution abuse the gift of sexuality, whatever one's sexual orientation. Christian proponents of accepting homosexual persons do not condone all forms of homosexual activity any more than they condone all forms of heterosexual activity. All Christians are repelled by promiscuity and prostitution as well as heterosexual or homosexual rape, sexual abuse of children, or any other acts which are not mutual, loving, and committed.

Robin Scroggs writes, "The basic model in today's Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament . . . that the conclusion seems inevitable: Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These interpretations borrow liberally from *Faithful Inquiry: Exploring Christian Responses to Homosexual Persons* (Minnesota Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1992); pages 26-29.

<sup>2</sup> From *Of Sacred Worth*, by Paul A. Mickey (Abingdon Press, 1991); page 58.

<sup>3</sup> From "A Common Thread of Opposition to Homosexuality Runs Through the Bible," by David A. Seamands, in *The Circuit Rider*, December 1991-January 1992; page 8.

<sup>4</sup> From *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, by John Boswell (The University of Chicago Press, 1980); page 100.

<sup>5</sup> From *Of Sacred Worth*; page 69.

<sup>6</sup> From *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*; page 107.

<sup>7</sup> From *Out in the World: Gay and Lesbian Life from Buenos Aires to Bangkok*, by Neil Miller (Random House, 1993); page 76. "In the minds of most Egyptians, 'gay,' if it meant anything at all, signified taking the receptive position in anal sex. On the other hand, a person who took the insertive role—and that seemed to include virtually all Egyptian men, to judge by what my acquaintances told me—was not considered gay. (This was the characteristic pattern throughout the southern Mediterranean and much of the non-Western world.) Many of the insults in the Arabic language concern being penetrated anally by another man."

<sup>8</sup> From *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, by Robin Scroggs (Fortress Press, 1984); pages 101-109.

<sup>9</sup> From *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*; page 107.

<sup>10</sup> From *Of Sacred Worth*; page 64.

<sup>11</sup> From "A Common Thread of Opposition to Homosexuality . . ."; page 9.

<sup>12</sup> From *The Bond That Breaks: Will Homosexuality Split the Church?* by Don Williams (Regal Books, 1978); page 70.

<sup>13</sup> From *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*; page 108.

<sup>14</sup> From *The New Testament and Homosexuality*; page 127.

# A Sampler of Ministries

## Education of Others in Your Congregation

1. Identify members of your study group who are willing to speak about what you have learned to Sunday school classes, United Methodist Women circles, or other groups. Develop a plan to notify program people of their availability.
2. Find members of your group who are willing to teach the entire six-session study to another group within the church. Form a group to publicize the study, to recruit members for it, and to support the leader.
3. Develop ways to help members of your church come to know gay and lesbian people as persons and as church members. (You need not confine yourself to United Methodists; find out which nearby churches are open to gay members.)
4. Invite gay and/or lesbian persons to speak to groups in your church.
5. Encourage your pastor to take training in ministry to and with lesbians and gays.
6. Develop an "inclusive-language" sheet for use in church bulletins, newsletters, announcements, and church life. Suggest language for inviting people to church events that allows people other than heterosexual couples to feel included.

## Support for Gays and Lesbians and Their Families

1. Form a support group for families of homosexual persons to help them deal with their pain and confusion.
2. Offer your church as a site for meetings of a local support group for friends and families of gays and lesbians (such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—P-FLAG) if there is one. If there is none, consider starting one.
3. Provide safe settings (such as a church-sponsored retreat) where homosexual persons and their families can come together for sharing and understanding under the leadership of a trained facilitator.
4. Sponsor a big-brother/big-sister program for mature Christian gays and lesbians who are willing to relate to gays and lesbians who have recently come out.
5. Sponsor support groups for gays and lesbians who are parents, to help them nurture their children in their unique and often-unsupported situation.

## Outreach

1. Invite organizations specifically for gay and lesbian persons to meet in your church building.
2. Find out what your area public schools teach about homosexuality and what the school recommends as appropriate language about and treatment of gays and lesbians.
3. Find out what AIDS ministries are already available in your community. Identify respite and hospice groups for AIDS patients. (A local hospital is a good place to begin your search for these ministries.) Get involved in one of these groups as an outreach ministry of the whole congregation or of individual members.
4. Actively support legislation and other community action that ensures the civil and human rights of gay and lesbian persons.
5. Take a public stand against hate crimes that target gay and lesbian persons.

## Action for Continued Learning

1. Study the Reconciling Congregations and Transforming Congregations programs. (See the bibliography on pages 58–64.)
2. Supply your church library with books about homosexuality geared for adolescents and adults.
3. For yourself or for the church library, subscribe to *Open Hands*, a publication of the Reconciling Congregations Program. Order from Reconciling Congregations Program; 3801 N. Keeler; Chicago, IL 60641; or telephone (312) 736-5526.
4. For yourself or for the church library, subscribe to the newsletter of the Transforming Congregations Program. Order from Transforming Congregations; 724 Niles Street; Bakersfield, CA 93305; or telephone (805) 325-0785.



# Members of the Committee to Study Homosexuality

The Committee to Study Homosexuality was created by legislative action of the 1988 General Conference. The wording of the mandate appears on pages 7–8 of the committee report.

Because the topic of homosexuality had been debated with growing intensity ever since the creation of the Social Principles at the 1972 General Conference, the choice of committee members called for careful thought. A six-person nominating committee appointed by Bishop James S. Thomas, then president of the General Council on Ministries, named the members of the Committee to Study Homosexuality. Because the General Conference mandate outlined specific areas to be examined, some of the members were chosen for their expertise in the fields of Scripture, theology, ethics, biology, psychology, or sociology.

Recommendations for persons to serve on the committee were invited from across the church. The nominating committee chose twenty-one persons from the resulting pool of 150 persons. The General Council on Ministries approved those twenty-one and added several more to improve jurisdictional, young adult, and other representation.

Four members resigned during the course of the committee's work: Bishop Neil L. Irons of the New Jersey Area (succeeded by Bishop Looney); Dr. James Logan, professor of systematic theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.; Dr. Stanley Hauerwas, professor of Christian social ethics at Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina; and Dr. James W. Holsinger, Jr., a physician, of Washington, D.C. Logan, Hauerwas, and Holsinger were not replaced.

The persons named below were on the committee at the close of its work; most of them had served throughout the committee's life.

Each member is identified here by that member's appointment or employment situation during the committee's work. Some have now been appointed elsewhere, have retired, or are serving in other capacities.

**Dennis Alexander**—B.S., Findlay College; M.Div., United Theological Seminary, Dayton; pastor since 1980 at Wesley United Methodist Church, a reconciling congregation; Minneapolis, Minnesota.

- Jeanne Barnett**—B.A. in music, Tulsa University; Chief of Employment Data and Research Division of Employment Development Department, State of California, Sacramento; Reconciling Conference Committee Chair; Board Chair, St. Mark United Methodist Church; Sacramento, California.
- Rodolfo C. Beltran**—B.S., Manuel L. Queson University; M.A., Wesleyan University, Philippines; lawyer, lay speaker, conference lay leader; member and officer of Hasel Tilman Memorial United Methodist Church; member, General Council on Ministries; Cabanatuan City, Philippines.
- Jan Bond**—Diaconal minister, worker in youth ministry and Christian education; schoolteacher; member, General Council on Ministries; Oak Grove, Missouri.
- David Diaz**—B.A. in political science and speech, Pan American University; M.Div., Iliff School of Theology; M.A., University of Texas; chair, Rio Grande Board of Higher Education and Ministry; Campus Minister, Pan American University; Edinburg, Texas.
- Victor Paul Furnish**—B.A., Cornell College; M.Div., Garrett; Ph.D., Yale; author of *Theology and Ethics of Paul*; University Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, since 1959; Dallas, Texas.
- Sally Brown Geis**—Director, Iliff Institute, Iliff School of Theology; clinical faculty, Department of Psychiatry, University of Colorado School of Medicine; General Conference delegate; member, General Council on Finance and Administration; Denver, Colorado.
- T. Kevin Higgs**—B.A. in religion and philosophy, Birmingham Southern College; graduate study at Vanderbilt Divinity School; candidate for diaconal ministry; youth minister, First United Methodist Church, Athens, Alabama; member, General Council on Ministries; Athens, Alabama.
- Bruce Hilton**—Director, National Center for Bioethics; former associate, Institute of Society, Ethics, and the Life Sciences (The Hastings Center); adjunct professor, University of California and John F. Kennedy University; AIDS Task Force, World Council of Churches; columnist on bioethics and on AIDS, *San Francisco Examiner*; Sacramento, California.
- Rachel Ann Julian**—B.A., Augsburg College; M.D., Washington University School of Medicine; M.Div., Lexington Theological Seminary; Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of Alabama School of Medicine; Birmingham, Alabama.
- William Kent**—A.B., Harvard; J.D., University of Florida College of Law; layperson; attorney with Federal Public Defender's Office; member, Florida and California Bar Associations and U.S. Tax Court; Jacksonville, Florida.
- J. Edward Legates**—William Neal Reynolds Professor and Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Emeritus, North Car-

- olina State University (retired); Ph.D., animal husbandry and genetics; North Carolina Layperson of the Year; Raleigh, North Carolina.
- Richard C. Looney**—Bishop of The United Methodist Church; South Georgia Conference; member, General Board of Church and Society; Macon, Georgia.
- C. David Lundquist**—General Secretary, General Council on Ministries; layperson; former attorney practicing in Michigan; Dayton, Ohio.
- William E. Lux**—Layperson, leader in Iowa Annual Conference; farmer; General Conference delegate; member, General Council on Ministries; Manchester, Iowa.
- Richard E. Martin**—Professor of Sociology at Butler University; member, Meridian Street United Methodist Church; Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Rebecca A. Parker**—B.A., University of Puget Sound; D.Min., Claremont; President, Starr King School for the Ministry; professor; pastor; Board of Directors, Center for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Domestic Violence; General Conference delegate; Berkeley, California.
- Arthur Pressley**—M.Div., Garrett; Ph.D. in pastoral care, Garrett-Evangelical; Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care, Drew Theological School; Madison, New Jersey.
- Tex Sample**—B.A. in psychology, Millsaps College; M.Div., Boston School of Theology; Ph.D. in social ethics and sociology of religion, Boston University; Professor of Ethics, St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City; General Conference delegate; Kansas City, Missouri.
- David A. Seamands**—Bible scholar; author; Professor of Pastoral Ministries, Asbury Theological Seminary; Wilmore, Kentucky.
- Claudia Webster**—AIDS/HIV Education Coordinator, Oregon Health Division, Department of Human Resources, Portland, Oregon; former United Methodist missionary to the Philippines; established family planning clinic; certified sex educator, American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists; Chickasaw Indian; Portland, Oregon.
- Wesley D. Williams**—staff member of the Southern New England Annual Conference; B.A., Morgan State; M.Div., Harvard; member, General Council on Ministries; Boston, Massachusetts.
- J. Philip Wogaman**—Ph.D. in ethics; Professor of Ethics, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.; president, American Society of Ethics; General Conference delegate; Washington, D.C.
- Nancy S. Yamasaki**—Chair of the Committee to Study Homosexuality; M.A., pastoral care and counseling; M.Div., Pacific School of Religion; pastor, Highland Park United Methodist Church, Spokane, Washington; member, General Council on Ministries; Spokane, Washington.

# Bibliography

The 1992 General Conference amended the recommendations of the Committee to Study Homosexuality to provide for the addition to this resource of an annotated bibliography on homosexuality. This bibliography does not attempt to be exhaustive. Nor does it seek to provide listings of technical works and research. However, it does offer a basic listing of works readable by an average layperson or clergyperson.

This bibliography was compiled during the summer of 1993. Several books listed may be out of print but should be available through public or college libraries. Please consult the holdings listings of such libraries for books published since this bibliography was compiled.

Arterburn, Jerry. *How Will I Tell My Mother?* Oliver Nelson Books, 1988. Why would a Christian man be attracted to homosexuality? Do early signs in childhood indicate susceptibility to homosexuality? What should a parent do when early signs develop? The author, a gay Christian, reveals the pain of living a double life, then deciding that there might be a way out. One chapter contains "special messages" to the church, persons with AIDS, and their families.

Borhek, Mary V. *My Son Eric*. Pilgrim Press, 1979; revised 1984. This is an absorbing story of an evangelical Christian mother's journey in learning to understand and accept her gay son. She traces her struggle with her own religious judgments and fears and her eventual emerging with new understandings not only of her son but of herself.

Borhek, Mary V. *Coming Out to Parents: A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents*. Pilgrim Press, 1983; revised 1993. Mary Borhek writes from a well-informed position. She has been there. Her earlier *My Son Eric* relates the story of her son's revelation of his homosexuality. Now she writes from her own experience as well as from her work with families of other gays and lesbians. She offers advice about the coming-out process for both the son or daughter and the parents. She traces the predictable variety of responses and the grief work that many parents must undertake.

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. The University of Chicago Press, 1980. This is one of the most-quoted pieces of scholarship on the history of homosexuality. A revolutionary study of the history of attitudes toward homosexuality in the Christian West, it challenges our assumptions about the past relationship of the church

to its gay members, among whom were priests, bishops, and canonized saints. Boswell's research spans history from the Greeks to Aquinas. His use of sources from the legal, literary, theological, artistic, and scientific fields, taken from records in a dozen languages, makes this one of the most extensive treatments of any single aspect of Western social history.

Coffin, William Sloane. *The Courage to Love*. Harper San Francisco, 1982. Many of these sermons apply to the questions people ask about gays and lesbians in the church. Coffin says we find it hard to reexamine ideas we have learned in the past. We sometimes prefer to cling to old dilemmas rather than face the risk of being cured. He calls Christians to rethink traditional beliefs and to move toward unconditional acceptance of gays as simply different from straights.

DeCecco, John P., editor. *Bashers, Baiters, and Bigots: Homophobia in American Society*. Harrington Park Press, 1985. Despite its angry title, this is a scholarly work, written in language easily comprehensible by anyone moderately familiar with the academic disciplines of sociology or psychology. A variety of scholars cover such matters as an overview of attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuals, the effect of education about homosexuality on the attitudes of college students, and data gathered about numbers of homosexual persons who have served in the U.S. military.

Fairchild, Betty. *Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979; revised 1989. Originally published in 1979, this book has now been reprinted; and a great many people still find it useful. It deals with many aspects of the lives of gay children and their relationships with their parents, including myths and stereotypes that parents must deal with before they can really hear their children's stories. Chapters discuss "coming out" from the point of view of the child as well as that of the parent. One chapter deals with defining *gay*, another fine chapter with "gays and religion," and one with the beginnings of a support group for parents and friends of homosexual people, now known as P-FLAG.

Fortunato, John E. *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*. Harper San Francisco, 1985. This book explores the interaction of spirituality and sexuality as well as the growth that homosexual persons' experiences of "exile" can present. It was written by a gay man, a psychotherapist and a man of deep faith, who finds hope and the love of God in his brothers and sisters.

Geis, Sally B. and Messer, Donald E., editors. *Caught in the Crossfire*. Abingdon Press, 1994. This book contains chapters centering on Christian perspectives on homosexuality, each written by two authors likely to take opposing sides of the question. At least four

of the authors were members of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, and several more brought expert testimony to the committee's work. Chapter titles play familiar themes: What does the Bible say about homosexuality? What does science teach about human sexuality? Is homosexuality a sin? Should gays and lesbians be ordained? Can the church disagree in love?

Glaser, Chris. *Come Home! Reclaiming Spirituality and Community as Gay Men and Lesbians*. Harper San Francisco, 1990. Presents a vision of faith, hope, and affirmation that invites gay men and lesbians to come home to their spirituality through Christian faith and community. Written not only for gay men and lesbians but also for others seeking to benefit from gay spirituality and ministry.

Greenberg, David F. *The Construction of Homosexuality: A Cross Cultural and Transhistoric Account of Homosexuality and How It Is Perceived and Responded to by Society*. The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Drawing on recent scholarship in anthropology and gay history, Greenberg includes preliterate tribal cultures, archaic civilizations, world religious systems, feudal periods, the Renaissance, modern systems extending into the present, and the advent of AIDS. This book is highly respected for its thorough examination of views of homosexuality in various cultures. Its fine-print bibliography covers 112 pages. The book itself covers five hundred pages. An authoritative resource.

Hasbany, Richard, editor. *Homosexuality and Religion*. Haworth Press, 1990. This is a collection of articles written by religious leaders prominent in their Christian or Jewish faith. The first article identifies homosexuality as a fishbone caught in the throat of the church. "The institution can't swallow it, and it just won't go away." The articles provide helpful perspectives on the struggle of religious traditions to develop creative, caring, and compassionate connections to homosexual persons within and outside congregations.

Hilton, Bruce. *Can Homophobia Be Cured? Wrestling with the Questions that Challenge the Church*. Abingdon, 1992. Hilton, a member of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, is director of the National Center for Bioethics, founded in 1971 to help laypeople discuss moral issues in science and medicine. He asks difficult questions about homosexuality: What if the real sin is not homosexuality but homophobia (hatred of lesbians and gay men)? What will the church do with the dawning realization that gays and lesbians are not a "they" but a "we," including devout and dedicated laypeople and clergy, our family members, worshiping beside us in the pew? Highly readable, informative, and thought-provoking.

Lovelace, Richard F. *Homosexuality and the Church*. Fleming H. Revell Co., 1978. This comprehensive work deals with the issue of homosexuality from an evangelical viewpoint. He traces the

Christian position from Augustine to Barth, then surveys and analyzes current challenges. Lovelace calls both sides of the debate to repentance and reconciliation. He outlines strategies for the church in reaching out to homosexual persons in compassionate and constructive ways.

MacPike, Loralee, editor. *There's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: An Anthology about Lesbians and Gay Men Coming Out to Their Children*. The Naiad Press, 1989. This is a collection of personal stories written by gay and lesbian adults, most of them about their experience of coming out to their children. Among the contributors are a veterinarian, a writer, a hotel employee, a college professor, a social worker, and an attorney. As with other writings of gay men and lesbians, this book gives a sense of the variety of thought, feeling, actions, and styles of living among people who are homosexual.

McDonald, Helen B., and Steinhorn, Audrey I. *Understanding Homosexuality: A Guide for Those Who Know, Love, or Counsel Gay and Lesbian Individuals*, Crossroad Books, 1993. Originally published under the title *Homosexuality: A Practical Guide to Counseling Lesbians, Gay Men, and Their Families*. Continuum Publishing Co., 1990. This basic introduction to the variety of lifestyles among homosexual persons will increase awareness of the unique needs, struggles, and self-identity changes that most lesbians, gay men, and their families encounter at each stage of life. Includes case studies and sample counseling situations. Designed to meet the needs of a variety of concerned readers such as psychologists, social workers, pastors, parents, and friends.

McNaught, Brian. *On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love*. St. Martin Press, 1988. Brian McNaught is a Christian, a fine writer, and a gay man. His book helps straight readers to an understanding of how gayness affects every aspect of life—what it's like for a boy who is becoming aware of his homosexual identity to date a girl for the high school prom, or to hear, laugh at, and tell heterosexual locker room stories because it's expected; what it's like at Christmas to be told neither you nor your life partner is welcome at home.

Mickey, Paul A. *Of Sacred Worth*. Abingdon, 1991. Offers a compassionate treatment of homosexuality, taking a traditional stance on homosexual practice, but affirming the personhood of gays and lesbians. Mickey presents a nonhysterical, nontechnical approach to the major concerns of this debate. One chapter demonstrates that AIDS is *not* God's judgment on homosexuals. He outlines the arguments and counter-arguments of traditionalists and those offering an alternative view in interpreting scriptural passages related to homosexuality. Well-footnoted, extensive bibliography.

Money, John. *Gay, Straight and In-Between: The Sexology of Erotic Orientation*. Oxford University Press, 1988. This book provides scholarly reading about the development of homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual behavior but provides no easy answers to the question of origins. An important work by a senior researcher with a history of over thirty years of long-term studies on sexual orientation. For a reader ready to dig into heavy scientific explanations involving animal experiments and clinical observations, the first two chapters of this book will be a rewarding source of information.

Nelson, James B. *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*. Pilgrim Press, 1983. This foundational work addresses spirituality and sexuality. Proposes the need for a sexual theology that would draw from liberation theologies to ask the question: What does sexuality say about faith?

Nelson, James B. *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Augsburg Fortress, 1979. While this book encompasses the larger subject of sexuality, the chapter on homosexuality is excellent. Too often, fear and prejudice prevent open and honest evaluation of the homosexual experience of a part of our population. Much quoted, this book sets a standard for Christian discussion of the issue and its theological implications. A readable, forthright, and clarifying discussion of our body-selves as an expression of God's grace.

Nicolosi, Joseph. *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality: A New Clinical Approach*. Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991. This book is written by a psychiatrist about his therapeutic work with "non-gay homosexuals"—homosexual men who are unhappy with their sexual orientation. Nicolosi helps his patients to control their homosexual feelings. While the therapy does not erase all same-sex attraction, it improves his clients' way of relating to other men and increases their own masculine identity. Includes several illuminating extracts from individual and group reparative therapy sessions.

Saia, Michael R. *Counseling the Homosexual*. Bethany House Publishers, 1988. Saia deals mainly with male homosexuality. His general thesis is that human beings, not God, are at fault for the development of homosexual orientation. He expresses the hope that this book "will serve as an instrument of direction and encouragement to those struggling with the temptations toward homosexuality." He warns that the attitudes toward homosexuality now prevalent in the church must change, lest the church seem to reject the persons it most wants to reach. Repentance, reconciliation, and restitution are the moral healing, laying the necessary groundwork for psychological healing.

Scanzoni, Letha, and Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Is the Homosex-*



*ual My Neighbor? Another Christian View.* Harper San Francisco, 1980. Written for "the struggling straight" by two writers who take the Bible seriously, this book takes for its biblical perspective Acts 10–11. The authors suggest that God sometimes overrides previously understood rules to help the believer move to a new understanding of God's will. Homosexual persons are described as the modern-day equivalent of Samaritans—outcast, rejected. The authors suggest that some who are prominent in antigay activity are themselves struggling with their sexual identity. Readers are assured that there are persons who are homosexual and mentally and spiritually healthy, living in healthy relationships.

Scroggs, Robin. *The New Testament and Homosexuality.* Augsburg Fortress, 1984. The first half of this book reviews the historical and contextual experience of homosexuality in Greek and Roman culture from the fifth century B.C. to the third century A.D. Male-male relationships in the military and in education were considered the norm and pederasty (sexual use of boys by adult males) was a frequent model for male-male relationships. Scroggs suggests that Paul's three writings about homosexual activity are directed to the Greco-Roman churches in whose culture pederasty was the norm for homosexual relationships. Scroggs believes that Paul was thinking about pederasty when he attacked what many modern readers assume was homosexuality.

Spong, John S. *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality.*

Harper San Francisco, 1990. Bishop Spong of the Episcopal Church calls for a new moral vision that will empower the church with a more inclusive teaching about equal, loving, non-exploitative human relationships. He discusses the causes of homosexuality and outlines methods for the church's positive pastoral response to the changing patterns of human lives.

Switzer, David K., and Switzer, Shirley A. *Parents of the Homosexual.* Westminster John Knox, 1980. This book is for parents of a homosexual child, particularly for those who find meaning in their Christian faith and participation in the church. It offers help with the confusion and emotional distress that such parents typically undergo, including shock, loss, anger, and guilt. Its closing chapter deals with what parents can do to be supportive and loving of their homosexual child.

Worthen, Frank. *Steps Out of Homosexuality.* Privately published. Available from Regeneration Books; P.O. Box 9830; Baltimore, MD 21284. Written by the "father of ex-gay ministry," this book offers a realistic and compassionate approach to overcoming homosexuality. It is probably the most helpful book available for the person who seeks to apply the life-changing power of Jesus Christ to his or her struggle for freedom from homosexuality.

## Videotapes

*On Being Gay: A Conversation With Brian McNaught.* 80 minutes; best viewed in two 40-minute segments. Brian McNaught, a committed Christian and practicing Roman Catholic, talks about the myths surrounding homosexuality and conveys a little of what it is like to be a gay man in a straight world. In the second 40-minute segment he centers on homosexuality and the church. (See book by the same title and author.)

*Casting Out Fear: Reconciling Ministries With Gay and Lesbian United Methodists.* 38 minutes. Includes leader's guide. Order from Reconciling Congregations Program, 3801 N. Keeler, Chicago IL 60641. Filmed at the 1987 convocation of Reconciling Congregations, this video includes words from Bishop Melvin Wheatley, Dr. Tex Sample, and Dr. Emilie Townes. Portrays the pain and estrangement lesbians and gay men feel in the church and the joys and struggles of Reconciling Congregations.

*Questions of Faith Series.* Produced by UMCCom and Parish of Trinity Church, New York City. Individual programs are 20 to 30 minutes each, and each has a comprehensive study guide. Recommended for this study: "Who's Got the Truth?" (Program 3, Series II) and "What's Religion Got to Do With Sex?" (Program 3, Series III). More than twenty prominent contemporary thinkers—Protestant, Jewish, and Roman Catholic—explore ideas about faith. Stimulating and relevant. Available from EcuFilm; 810 Twelfth Ave., S.; Nashville, TN 37203.

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**Dorothy Williams** lives in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota where she is a member of Hopkins United Methodist Church. Her father, a minister, a nephew, and a daughter are also ordained Methodist clergy.

She is retiring from the position of director of the Search Institute in Minneapolis and is coauthor of *Ministry: Religion on Capitol Hill*, and *The Quic*

In 1990, when the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church formed a two-year Task Force on Ministry to and for Homosexual Persons, Williams was chosen to chair the task force. In that role, she coedited and helped to write *Faithful Inquiry*, a curriculum produced by the Minnesota Annual Conference.

For many years she has led retreats, taught at seminary, and spoken to both church and secular audiences on topics related to parenting, adolescent behavior, spiritual growth, and education in human sexuality.

Ms. Williams and her husband, Lyle, have been married forty-seven years. They have three grown children and five grandchildren.

The Church Studies

# Homosexuality

A Study for United Methodist Groups  
Using the Report of the Committee to Study  
Homosexuality

THE CHURCH STUDIES HOMOSEXUALITY guides persons to explore the controversial issues of homosexuality from a Christian perspective and to consider ways to be in ministry to and with persons who are homosexual.

The Study Book contains the complete text of the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, as received by the 1992 General Conference of The United Methodist Church. It also includes the official United Methodist position on homosexuality as contained in the Social Principles, plus other helpful study resources.

The Leader's Kit includes a Leader's Guide and an audiocassette for use in six one-and-one-half hour sessions. Alternative plans for ten one-hour sessions and for a workshop or retreat setting are also included.



Cokesbury



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